

Under Glass

“How long have you been having these ‘dreams’?”

His voice echoes off the plexi-glass walls of this room; I can almost see them tremble at the impact of the sound wave. It makes me feel more hollow than usual, which is what I’d like to talk about, but nobody in this place is interested in what I perceive while waking.

“How long have you had them?”

Whose idea was this place, I wonder. What did it used to be, before it became a hutch for the likes of me? A squash court, maybe? A plexi-glass box in the middle of a gymnasium. Maybe it was used for exhibition games? A lot of the old stadiums have been turned into facilities like this. It isn’t difficult to look out there and picture rows of bleachers, hundreds of anxious faces, the blank dead eyes of cameras waiting for the image on which they will pounce. The one they will devour.

“HOW LONG!”

“Why do you ask me the same questions every time?”

“Because you haven’t answered them yet.”

“Maybe they’re the wrong questions. Do you even know what you’re trying to find out?”

“How long have you had the dreams?”

“As long as I can remember.”

“And how long is that?”

“How could I possibly know? How long have I been here? I can’t seem to remember ever being anywhere else.”

“What did you dream last night?”

“I dreamed that I was dying.”

It’s fucking cold. The legs and ass of my jeans are plastered to my legs with rain, and the tires of my bike sizzle on the asphalt like cooking bacon, spraying a stream of muddy runoff across the back of my windbreaker—but the long cool

run down Cardiac Hill is still something to glory in. We sing around the curves, this bike and I, coasting halfway up the hill above the old dairy farm before I have to start pedaling. I hit the door of my house ten minutes later, exhausted; hands too numb to feel my keys fumble with the locks on the door. Hot shower. I want a hot shower.

The answering machine light's blinking, so I hit the button on my way to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. I'm soaked to the bone but it doesn't keep me from being thirsty. Seems like a waste.

A voice comes on the speaker and stop-start, everything changes. Needle on a record player skipping tracks; record gets scratched and you can't go back.

"What's the first thing you remember?"

"Dancing."

"And what is that?"

"I don't know."

The voice is warbly and uncertain; it sounds like it is coming from underwater.

"Honey? It's your dad. I need you to help me. I'm being held prisoner. I need you to help me. They've drugged my food. I can't get out. Please. Your mother's to blame. Don't call her. Don't tell her I called you. Please help me. I'm a prisoner of war; I'm being held in a camp, they're poisoning me. Everyone's against me. I have to go now; they're coming. Get me out of here."

My heart is a dead fish lying uselessly inside my chest. My pants stink of rain, and mud, and sweat. The dogs in the basement whine to be let out, so I get up and walk downstairs to open the door for them. I realize on some level that I am being born.

"What happened to your father?"

"Who?"

"Don't be stupid. You aren't fooling us."

“Nothing happened to him.”

“We know you were thinking about him.”

“Apparently your machines can be mistaken.”

“We weren’t using the machines.”

His cancer is a tumor in our house. His malignancy lives on the living-room sofa, radiating fingers of despair. It metastasizes and digests us whole. The building’s bones begin to show. I escape downstairs one 3-am to find that my parents’ bathroom looms directly over our kitchen table; my father, vomiting, thunders overhead.

His relentless self-pity is a punch in the face, and eventually I flee the pummeling. I flee, I fly, I sink like a stone into the warm bath of my cowardice. Eventually he dies, and then I come home.

“What were you using, then?”

“Our eyes. We have recently learned to see.”

“Congratulations. Are you through with me yet?”

“No.”

“Pity.”

The night before the funeral, I dream. My father waits for me in my bedroom, dressed in a suit and tie. His hair is combed, and even his eyebrows are less wild than usual. He waits on the bed, with his feet set evenly on the floor. He stands up to meet me, and I see that he has packed a suitcase, a pink flowered suitcase that is very, very small. I take his hand and we walk outside under the dripping trees, and I lead him, living, into his grave.

“Do you miss the phenomenon of touch?”

“Not at all.”

“But your last dream was about touch.”

“I didn’t tell you about my last dream.”

“You pictured it for us in your head.”

“So you can see my thoughts now?”

“I told you we had learned to see.”

“Who are you? Who is ‘we’?”

“Are you trying to change the subject?”

“No. I’m succeeding.”

“What happened to your father?”

“Nothing. He died.”

“Why?”

“Because people die. All people die.”

“Are you going to die?”

“As far as I know, yes.”

“Do you want to?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

“When, then?”

“When I am tired of living.”

“Do you think that will be soon?”

“If you never shut up, maybe sooner than I think.”

“Do you know how long you’ve been here?”

“I already told you I don’t.”

“Would you like to leave?”

“Yes.”

“What if I told you one of the walls you ‘see’ is not really there? A mirage.”

This is a trick. They have tried this before. The first time, I waited until darkness and then threw myself at every wall in this place. The second time, I did it again. The third, I walked the perimeter, trailing one finger along the walls until I arrived at my starting-place again. There are no doors out of here. No doors, no windows, no vents, no grates. No options but to sit and to wait. I sit on the floor and close my eyes. I will not answer. I will think of last night’s dream.

I dream that I cannot breathe. I am a fish, drowning in air, or I am a human, choking on water, sunlight swimming watery and unreachable before my eyes. My chest aches to bursting from the fiery need to breathe. The pain grows worse and worse, and then—is gone.

My face is wet with tears that aren’t mine, and I am wrapped up tight in what I once lost: the pressure, the scent, the temperature of certain skin. My father’s arms. I am welcomed home, forgiven. Safe. I am rocked in his embrace like a baby, and his kiss on my head drives all my wants away.

I wake up tired. My chest aches, and my eyes are sticky from crying. For quite some time I do not move.

“How long have you been here?”

“How many times do we have to do this?”

“We will do it until you understand. What is your earliest memory?”

“I don’t HAVE one! I have no memories! Now shut up and go away!”

“Did you ever kill things, when you were a child?”

This is new. “No.”

“What about little things, like spiders?”

“No. I was afraid of them.”

“Do not lie. Did you ever kill spiders, when you were a child?”

“No, I was scared to touch them. I was afraid they would jump on me.”

“Did you never kill one by trapping it? Say, under a glass jar?”

My heart is a dead fish lying uselessly in my chest.

“Did you ever tease it, allowing it to think it might get free?”

My pants stink of dirt, and sweat, and piss, and shit.

“Did you ever wonder whether it was afraid?”

I am a prisoner. I am being held in a camp. Get me out of here. They are poisoning me.

“No.” I whisper, afraid to hear. My chest aches.

“Did you ever wonder whether it could dream?”

The lights go out.

I realize on some level that I am being killed.