

Knife-Thoughts

Morning sends a scalding light into my eyes to pry them open. For a while I resist, rolling in the dirt, but then the light leaks through the crease in my lids and burns like powdered cleanser. I twist my thumb knuckles into the moist sockets and after a while I can see through the burning and into the shrubs under the bridge where I live. Last night's sandwich lies tattered, and ants are at it, tugging, tussling and slapping the greenish meat with their antennas. I kick dirt, mumbling nonsense at the ants but they work around the dirt, dragging glistening clumps of meat off to wherever they go. For a moment I am there, upside down, tangled in moist roots with grit under my eyelids and in my teeth and ants scuttling into my mouth and ears and nose. I have to make myself stop thinking about it before the knife-thoughts come.

I always see the knives in a bouquet, tied together somehow at the handles, only they churn like pistons, ringing against each other and moving into my brain where they shred the tender, watery meat in my head until it oozes in clots down my throat and out of my ears. Sometimes I have to lie in the shrubs under the bridge while my head heals and all day I seem to be coughing up bloody hunks of myself and swallowing them. I wonder where the thoughts go when you eat them but if I think about it too long I can hear the knives ringing and have to lie down again. If they get too deep into me I won't know who I am and I won't be able to save Miranda.

When I think of her she stirs beside me and sits up, her mouth smacking, a sour smell blowing out of her and her eyes dull but peering somehow past the shrubs and into the workings of the world. I see a stained hand come up to slick back a shock of hay-colored hair. The hair falls lower than it was and she blows at it with a crooked mouth for a moment and then gives up. Her eyes jerk over to me and blink and she grunts and then closes her eyes, sleeping while she sits upright, it appears. I watch her mouth twitch and listen to traffic while

her eyes roll under her lids and then her mouth opens and she says, “Hungry, jeez,” and presses a thin hand against her gut.

I have cold soup in a canister and I pour it into two metal cups and watch her while she drinks, holding the cup with two hands, her pinkies raised, grunting when she swallows. Her throat seizes and releases and I can smell tomatoes and thin metal underneath that reminds me of the knives. Only now they don’t come because my head is full of Miranda and the smell of soup and I am making a plan for the day. I touch the money in the pocket of my jacket and try to think of where it is taking me but I know the place only as an idea and can only see a haze of warmth with no bridges and no ants and no cops.

For now, though, we’re here, even I can see that. I roll the canister and the cups wet with soup into a gray blanket and stuff it near the foot of the bridge where, for some reason, no one bothers it, not even cops. Miranda is still sitting in the bushes and is watching the ants. She looks like a dirty child except for her hands, which have swollen knuckles and short, chipped nails and slivers of dirt in the creases. She wipes her mouth a lot and leaves smears of dirt on her lips and cheeks and sometimes when she smiles or grimaces or yells I can see dirt in her teeth, like she’s eating it or passing out in it with her mouth open. I know that she suffers by the way her mouth works in her sleep and by the tired expression she wears even with the needle in her arm.

She wipes her hands on her white tank top, palms open, scrubs her nose with a knuckle and looks down the long hill to the highway where cars are glinting and roaring under the bridge. She walks down first and I follow her on the dirt path we have worn and from behind I can see her shoulder blades and thin muscles working in her back. Wedges of hip bone hold her dusty jeans at her waist, which is clogged with the tail of the shirt. At the highway she turns left to follow a band of sidewalk that glitters in the sun and I follow her silhouette, watching the blank faces in the cars as they stare everywhere that we aren’t. I have a wild urge to run into the road, to send them squealing and clanging into each other or into the concrete ditch under the bridge and when I think of it I see the knives for a moment, each blade catching the light as it churns out of the bunch to cut. But then they stop churning and hang in my head for a moment before they disappear and there is nothing left but the vague taste of metal and a tingling that circles my scalp and then snakes down through my head and settles in my back teeth.

Her jeans whisper and her cruddy sneakers rasp and she walks, arms swinging, toward the shadows of the park. She looks back at me and I see that her dull expression is gone, her eyes are sharp, whites burning under the pink rims of her lids. We wander in the park for a while as the wind moves the arms of the oaks and dots of sunlight crowd and then scatter on the ground. Joggers bounce by with their faces set and their eyes darting. Their bright clothes

smudge in my vision and when I swallow and can taste the colors like heavy frosting at the back of my throat.

As the day wears on, the heat comes up and after a while a heavy oily smell oozes out of my clothes. I can taste it on my fingers and in the air around me and I can see it burn the nostrils of people in the park if they accidentally get close enough. I move deeper into the shadow of an oak where the air is cooler and where the smell of my clothes burns less, although I can still feel it drifting out of my shirt in a sour vapor and moving through the wind, heavier and hotter than the other air.

I look for Miranda but she is gone, lost in the crowd, eaten up by the noise and the burning brightness of the day. I don't know where she went and can't think about it or the knife-thoughts will come. I settle inside myself at the base of the oak and listen to my own breathing and the wind in the leaves. I pretend not to hear the voices in the park, which is not hard to do with traffic roaring. I breathe deeply and think of my plans. They move in my head like pencil sketches being sorted on a desk and even though I can't make them still, I feel better watching them. I know I have money and that we can get away. I close my eyes and watch the drawings and the warmth of the day leaks into me and makes me heavy. Then the drawings start to swirl like mixed paint and after a while they blend into the darkness behind my eyes and I am asleep in a blur of my thoughts. For a while I am floating on the darkness on my back on a black lake that stretches everywhere. The lake is empty and there is no world beyond it and above me the sky is as black as the water. I know without looking that tiny waves in the lake reflect light from somewhere and when I try to think of where, I think of Miranda. And then I am thrashing and the lake is pulling me down, the water draining into my ears. My feet go down like weights and for a moment I am hung in the blackness with my arms spread and then the water comes up smoothly over my bottom teeth and into my mouth and I am choking and awake again in the park with the knife-thoughts churning in my head.

I open my eyes to see that the world is full of stinking green light. Sounds are attacking one another. Everything that moves smudges the air with its colors and pulses with poisonous light. I have to make a noise to breathe, a tiny growl that grows in my chest and rockets out of me in a coughing yelp. Everyone looks at me, their eyes blazing, tiny comets of fire circling their irises. I can smell rot on everyone, a meaty aroma on their breath and in the water on their eyeballs. A damp colorless paste of pulverized lunch is clinging to almost everyone's teeth. Tongues squirm and thrash in puddles of spit. When their clothes rub together, the sound attacks my ears, boils in my ear canals. I scream and the sound erupts in muffled bubbles as if I am underwater. I squeeze my eyes shut and the lids scald each other. They feel as if they are bleeding or melting and behind the lids I trap colors from the outside world that swirl in the darkness into steely

points that churn into my brain. Shreds of brain leak into my mouth and down my throat. Blood bubbles in my ears. I scream again and pull my hair while the knives go faster, ringing against one another and slinging droplets as they go.

Then I am on the people in the park. Sunlight seems to grip my head like a vice. Profanity pours into my ears and then out of my mouth. I call them names, spitting, swinging my arms. "Pig fuckers!" I shriek, but my voice is not mine. It is the sound of large cans falling on concrete, of hard things meeting other hard things and then crumbling, of vibrations that shatter bone.

The rest of the day is an explosion of shrieking color. I blaze through the city with rocks boiling in my throat and the knives squelching into what is left of my brain. I don't remember who I am anymore. I gag on bits of brain. I can hear blood bubbling in my ear. But I can't see people anymore. Everything spins in confusion and hums and sparks with electricity. My arms go limp and I drag them around the city looking for quiet and darkness. My throat whines and squeezes, but I am no longer certain I am breathing. When I inhale, light breaks like glass and passes into me, grinding in my teeth. But after a while the knife-thoughts are farther away and slowing down. I spit and whine and rock as I walk, and when I am sure I am breathing again the sky is darker and I am not sure what has happened.

I sit on a curb near a store I don't remember and vomit into muddy grass. I retch in my own voice and my bile is laced with things I remember eating. I can breathe without chewing and when people pass I don't bark at them or rush them or swing my arms. I sit quietly, my arms hanging, and try to sweat out whatever was holding me. The friction of the knife-thoughts aches in my teeth, but I can not hear them anymore. I don't taste blood anymore and I can hear my own breathing.

A man moves like an embarrassed shadow to give me money and I use it to buy a tall can of beer from the clerk in the strange store and walk toward where I think I was. I can see our bridge close by so I haven't gone far. I move toward it as traffic roars around me. Colors aren't smeared anymore and sounds don't attack me. I pour gurgles of beer into my mouth and swish before swallowing. Comfort eases up from my belly and moves slowly to my fingers. I want to shout for Miranda but can't because I also want to stay invisible.

For a while I live in the blur from the beer, trudging through the streets with warmth in my fingers. No one notices me anymore. My feet throb and my legs are numb. I find my way back to our bridge and wander through the brush for a while before I settle in our spot. I can smell Miranda's sweat in the blankets. I think for a while but can't remember when she came.

The evening comes down like a mystery of the past, dark and fading, holding things from before but hiding them. The sky is pink and ribbed with purple clouds. Hunger claws at me but I won't leave. I cross my arms and sit in the dirt, waiting for her. When she finally comes, she is dirtier than before,

stumbling, a corner of her mouth bleeding. She moves past me and sits in the dirt. Her eyes are pink and ragged, rolling in their sockets. There is a splotch in the crook of her arm from the needle. Her head rolls as if on a hinge and she smiles through me.

“Holy shit, man” she says, blowing out an antiseptic smell. Her fingers are blackened around the nails. One nail is broken, part of it bent but hanging on. She sways, swipes at her hair.

“Where did you go?” I say.

She points with her hand, her fingers hanging limply, and says, “To get the crud, man. To get it and to give it.” Her mouth splits open in a kind of smile.

“You were with them, weren’t you,” I say, my voice filling my throat. Knife-thoughts gather, glistening, aching in my teeth.

She looks at me, her head wobbling, and hugs her knees. She shakes her head and the bottoms of her lids glisten with tears.

“Don’t crowd me, man,” she says in a strained voice. “Don’t try to muscle me. Don’t blow it.”

I know it’s time; it always was. I take her face in my hands and stare into her pupils.

“I have money,” I say. “We’ll get away.”

“To where?” she says, her eyes rolling. She laughs and I see rotten teeth. Her breath smells like earth and kerosene.

“I’ve been keeping it for later,” I say, unable to hold the secret, hot with relief that is still far away. I tap my jacket pocket and stare at her and I see her eyes twitch and then focus. She laughs again and strokes my hands, her calluses bumping over my knuckles.

“You gonna save me?” she whispers. A laugh hiccups in her chest. “You gonna save the princess?”

“We’ll both go,” I say. “There are better places.”

She lies back and watches the brush with vacant, watery eyes.

“There’s worse too,” she says. I try to say something back but she is already asleep.

I watch her sleep as darkness leaks into everything. I can feel my heart pumping in my chest and in my joints from the thrill of confession. Miranda lies as if dead, one dirty hand resting on her belly and the other limp in the dirt. I start to think of places, seeing cleaner sidewalks, small baskets of food, new clothes. There are no cops in the new places, and now I know I have to find them. I close my eyes and see us walking, me in the lead this time. She is smiling and cleaner, her hair blowing in the wind.

“Somewhere,” I say loudly. The street lamps whine and traffic roars on the overpasses. “Anywhere but here,” I say just to hear my voice. Sleep comes as it always does, in a moving cloud at the edge of a storm—full of dark things and half-hidden sounds. I pull my coat around me and lay beside her and before long

I am in the darkness with lumps of the ground aching even into my flickering dreams. But I wake to her face, frantic and focused. Her hands crawl around, tug at my trousers. She swipes her hair and blows a breath. Then she bites at my cheek, kisses me, pulls at my clothes, panting. I feel a pinch on my thigh.

“Hey, no pinch,” I say.

“Shhh,” she says, tugging, fumbling with clothes. “We’ll go. I’ll go with you. You wanna save the princess?”

She struggles for a long moment with my jacket, wadding it and tangling her hands in it before she tosses it aside. Then she envelops me, grimacing. “I’ll go with you,” she says, her voice somehow sweaty. She moves frantically, pinning me down, her head lowered, shocks of greasy hair over her eyes. She leans back with her mouth open and seems to be yawning or moaning. Inside, she is hot and slippery but hard with bones. The friction is abrupt, almost painful. But after a while a color I’ve never seen blooms under each of my eyelids and covers the whole world. I feel mild jerking in my pelvis but now I am removed, floating inside my body. She is still moving on me when I see the flash in her hand.

“You stuck me,” I say, watching her turn to mist and reform. “Why?”

She puts a rough dirty hand on my mouth.

“Shhh,” she says. “We’ll go. I’ll go with you.”

I wake in a clamor, my mouth full of web. For a while my arms won’t move. A steel rod seems to anchor my neck. I strain against myself and flares of numbness sting my fingers. I can feel that she is gone. The side of my body she was on is cold, number than the other. I breathe deeply, coaxing blood into my hands, and after a while I can sit up to look around. Her footprints mark the dirt in all directions. Some of the limbs in the shrubs have been snapped. Our stale bread is gone. My jacket is thrown across a bush as if to dry and when I check my pocket for the money my shuddering hand closes on nothing.

I flutter the jacket, look under the bush and check the pocket again, but I can feel how far away the money is. I destroy our spot, throwing dirt, cutting myself on the shrubs. I slobber into the dirt. My breath feels like hot smoke. I want to scream but my throat is making its own sound—a rattle, a boiling sigh.

The sky drops a stinging mist that tastes like metal and blood. The overpass is a giant toothless jawbone salivating into the shrubs. I trudge down the embankment, going nowhere, my arms pin wheeling for no reason, hands bent into claws. Near the road, I spit and roar at traffic. This time, I will the knife-thoughts to come. I squeeze my head between filthy palms and think of blades—churning, scraping, aching in the ears and teeth.

The knives churn into my brain but now there is no pain. I can touch the handles. They bump my palms and slip through my fingers. I seize a handle and the knife stops for a moment while the others churn around it. They are mine; I can control them. I gather my thoughts into a meaningless knot, a muscle in my brain. Then I grip the handles and turn, straining on the inside, my eyeballs

vibrating. Halfway around the knives grip, but then an imaginary tendon snaps and they are loose. I can swing them now, point them where I want. I think of them, watch them. They are free of blood now, clean, glistening, flashing light. I whirl them around, but now they do not go into my brain. They leap and scrape just before my eyes. They are completely mine; they always were. I take the handles in my hands. They are warm, as if I had been holding them all along. I turn the blades away from myself again, utter an unrecognizable shriek, and go out into the world.