

TORNADO SEASON

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Black
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Press

For Cara, Kelsey, and Kylee

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KANSAS BEFORE OZ

When we were very young the world spun with colors that other people did not see. It began in the nursery. You cried and your tears filled the room with a bruised sunset. I covered my ears at the parade we watched because the orange of the blaring trumpets was too bright. And at bedtime we fell asleep to the deep, midnight blue of the night train that drove through town. "Do you see it too?" I whispered with my hand in yours, and you nodded and we knew that we were not alone.

You were not my brother, but we were children together. Nobody told us why, and we did not need to know. Our mother tucked us in and sang prayers to us with her voice of silvery purple, and we hugged her goodnight and breathed in her hues.

I did not know that my colors belonged to you. We had just graduated from high school when the tornado hit our house. It stole you from me, and you stole the colors. The doctors said I hit my head. They said that perhaps my hearing was damaged and that my ears would ring forever. They asked me if it hurt, and I nodded and said it is a knife. But I did not say that it took away the colors, that now the world no longer spins but is still and gray. They brought me into a booth and hooked wires to my ears and played sounds for me. "Can you hear it?" they asked me. I said yes, I can hear it. But I cannot see it, I thought.

When we were children, you called my name one night and together we slipped out of our bedroom window. People say that the night is black, but they do not see like we see. We stood in the golden night while the

dew soaked up our feet. You pulled me to the pavement, and we ran, and our wet feet left our trail behind us. It did not matter where you were leading me because I trusted you. "Be very quiet," you said, so we ran on tiptoe, fearing that our neighbors would wake up, old Mr. Snider with his army green bark, or Mrs. Lowenstein with her raspberry laugh. A mockingbird sang like it was morning. We watched his melody dance in the night. It was brighter than I had seen before, without the daylight to wash it away. We ran all the way to the golf course where our father hit white balls into holes when he did not want to come home to us. "Look," you said when our feet touched the shorn grass. "It is a good place to be." You let go of my hand and you threw your arms out behind you and you ran. The sprinklers sputtered awake and clicked red and orange circles of water. You leapt through them and said to join you. So I threw my arms back and ran like you did. We spun around and around in the water. Fireflies glowed above our heads, bright spots of darkness against the amber night. The grass was so soft I hardly felt it below my feet, and when I looked down I saw that we were flying, that our bare feet hovered in the air far above the grass. I did not know we knew how to do that.

We flew to a tree on the edge of the golf course. Now the tornado has torn it down, but that night it enveloped us. We landed on its branches, and once we were inside it the tree grew and became a world. Its branches thickened and twisted and stretched farther than we could see. It could have held one hundred children if we had asked it. We jumped from branch to branch. I remember the way you laughed yellow that night, like a sunflower in the summer or a bright sticky popsicle. You hooked your knees over a branch like you were a trapeze artist, and I did not worry that you would fall, because I knew that the tree would catch you. "Climb higher," you said. We climbed as high as we could, and the tree grew with us. We could not reach the top because there was no top. "Remember this night," you told me, like you were much older than I was.

I was not often afraid back then, back when we had colors. But some nights we huddled together in bed and listened to the sound of

people yelling, and sometimes there were other worse sounds too, and the colors disappeared. That was fear, tall and empty, a body without a face who sometimes came in at night and did things to us that we tried to forget. Then I would look at you and see your breath hitting the air, and I would close my eyes and be unafraid again.

Now that the tornado has hit I do not see colors. To another person I would say that the world is gray, an old-fashioned movie, Kansas before Oz, but you know that gray is a color and like all colors can be beautiful and satisfying. To you, then, I will say that the world is colorless. I do not know how I still see anything. Perhaps you would know, but you are gone and cannot tell me.

At your funeral we did not bury you. Your body was not there. I wondered where it went. "He was not our son, but we loved him like he was," our mother said. Our father stood next to her, tall and silent. The rain fell because that is what rain does at funerals. I saw the drops floating in the air like small clear balloons, and when they landed they matched the grass and the tombstones and the trees and the dirt. They disappeared, and I wondered if they had ever truly existed. We threw dirt on top of your empty grave, as if your body were really there. "I will find you," I said, because I could not imagine the world that I saw.

The tornado still rings in my ear, from the place where my head hit the door. That sound alone brings color, but it is pale and faded and hardly a color at all.

Now I stand in front of a long road that stretches west. I think that if I drive far enough the colors will return, and if I reach the end of the road, past the mountains and the deserts, and they have not, I will step into the ocean, and I will swim out. I will swim until I can swim no more. My mother holds me before I leave. She is crying a wail that I cannot see but I can feel. I promise her that she will not lose me too. But I have to go, because maybe if I go I will find you again and we will climb trees until we reach the sky. "I have always loved you,"

she says to me. "Even when I could not protect you." I tell her I know and that it is not her fault, the tornado was too strong, and our family was too weak. "That is not all I mean," she says, and I say I know that too, and it is okay.

I drive without thinking, and I stop only for gas. I no longer eat food, and I do not pause to see the landscape, because without the color of sounds the world that I see is dim and blurred. I drive until I reach a great underground lake of acidic water. The water spews from the ground, and it kills everything around it. I step onto the dead earth. I hear the rush of the geysers that sound as barren as the land. The water feeds on the earth, gnawing and reshaping it every few years. A group of tourists ask me to take their picture, and I turn from them as if I cannot hear them. If they follow me I will say that I am deaf from a tornado accident. They should not want their picture taken here on this ashen terrain. Here there is no life.

I imagine that I am standing on the moon, and in every direction the surface is desolate and gray. Even the flag planted so boldly has now faded. I hear the shouts of my fellow astronauts, but their voices are hollow. They echo against miles and miles of emptiness. How can sound be seen when it has nothing to crash into? Maybe that is why the colors are gone. Maybe you were what they crashed against. I watch the steam that rises from the poisonous water. It hisses against the air. I turn away.

Do you remember when we first saw the ocean? It brimmed with life and color, so different from the dead lakes where I now stand. We wore swimsuits that hung off of our thin bodies, and we drove with our parents to the Gulf Coast, where every spring the birds flock from Mexico, pink and blue and gold spots in the rosy morning sky. We dipped our toes into the water. It was as warm as the air. It dissolved the sand from our legs. You pointed far into the distance, where the colors of the horizon became one, and you said, "I want to go out there."

"It is too deep," I said. "We will drown."

And you said, “We cannot drown.” We swam as far as our arms would carry us. We swam until our mother called to us to come back, but before we returned we waited. We hung in the water like it was the sky and we were flying. Our heads bobbed, and we looked at the world, flat and endless and bright, and when the waves splashed their salt we watched it fly into the air. “This is how I want to die,” you said. “I want the water to swallow me. I would not mind.”

“Don’t talk like that,” I said. “It’s creepy.” You laughed at me and asked me what was the color of death. I said I did not know. I did not have a color for it yet, but hovering in the water that summer afternoon, far from the shore and alone with you in the world, I knew that death was not colorless. Now I drive west toward the ocean, and I wonder if I will learn at last the answer to your question.

I am driving now through the mountains, higher and higher. At the top I can see summer snow, and I wish we could play in it. I think you would have liked snow. I think you would have turned it into a castle that was tall and strong and sparkling. You would have made yourself king, and there we could have ruled. The mountains stretch out in front of me, and I know they must be beautiful, but I cannot see it. I want to speed through them. Once I have reached the other side, perhaps the world will begin again to turn with the sounds that I remember seeing. High above me I see the ridge of the continental divide. I hear your voice in my memories. “Come with me,” I hear you say, and I must climb. I park my truck, the one that used to sputter coughs of russet. I pull on a sweatshirt and begin climbing. The wind blows. It twists into my lungs and pulls out my breath. I choke, but I do not stop climbing. The trees fade away, and my skin cracks in the cold, dry air. I clutch at rocks to keep from falling. When I climb everything hurts—my lungs and my knees and my head from the tornado. The wind rushes into my ear and echoes in my head so loudly that I feel blind. I stumble to the top and stand on the mountain’s ridge. Below me the earth stretches out with pools

and hills and trees that have been bleached away. I yell. My voice echoes, and I imagine what it would have looked like once, the colors bouncing from mountain to mountain. Why did we never fly here to watch, you and I? When I have yelled everything I know how to yell I stand and wait. And he comes. A solitary swallow. Struggling against the thin air, thousands and thousands of feet above the sea. For a moment I see a flash of blue that is as bright as I remember colors being. He flutters across the divide, and he is gone.

My truck winds through the foothills. I drive quickly because night is coming soon and I do not want to be trapped. I think about the swallow. I wonder where he came from and how he survived so far away from any other life. I think about him, and I think about you, how both of you came from nowhere and lived where you were not supposed to be and then were gone. I am almost to the other side when I pass a woman who shivers next to her car with her head in her hands. I want to keep driving, because I am so close and I am not on this journey to meet strangers, but she is alone like I am now, and so I back up.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. She says that her car is out of gas, and night is coming soon, and she is so, so afraid. Her voice blends with the mountains, colorless like the world around her. I tell the woman it is okay, I am here, and I will help you.

“How can you possibly help me?” she asks. “Even if you drive me somewhere safe I will be stranded there. I will be trapped.”

“Don’t be scared,” I say. I hold her hand and I lead her to my truck. One night when we hid in the closet you held my hand like that. I was afraid of the things that were about to happen to us, but you weren’t. “Why aren’t you frightened like me?” I asked you, and you smiled at me like you understood something that I did not, as if nothing could really quite touch you. I lead the woman to my truck, and I give her my sweatshirt because she looks cold. She shakes as the chill flees her body and she thanks me. The hood frames her face like a mane. Her teeth chatter when she speaks, although the night still

feels warm to me. I ask her where she is coming from. She says she lives down the mountain a ways. She does not say why she is traveling. I look at her and wonder what color she would have been. I can see it faintly, a washed-out blue that shimmers above her head.

We drive down the mountain. I want to keep her talking, but I do not know what to ask. The questions I used to ask you sound so silly now. Where are the other parts of me? Do they live in another universe? Why are the moments between sleep and waking the truest moments of the day? Will we be able to fly too far one day and never come back? I ask her instead, "Would you like something to eat?" She nods, and I pass her a bag of potato chips. She crunches them and licks the salt from her fingers, but she does not ask for water.

Night falls. The air cools, and the gas light in my truck blinks to life. When the woman sees it she wrings her hands and I think she might cry. "It will be okay," I tell her. At the base of the mountain we see the dim light of a bar. "See," I say. "There is nothing to worry about." We pull up to the building. Inside it looks like every other bar has always looked—chipped paint and dirty counters and country music that sounds like an empty tin cup. I ask the bartender if there is a hotel in town or somewhere we can stay, and he names a place and asks if we want a drink. On the far side of the bar a group of men sit with whiskey in their hands. They turn to us, and one man stands up.

"It's you," he shouts. "Where the hell have you been?" The woman cowers. She ducks behind me, although my body is still small like a child's body. When the man steps near, his face disappears, and I know that he would be colorless, even if I had not hit my head in the tornado. His arms are bare and cold. He wears heavy boots. "You're coming back with me," he says to the woman. "You are my wife," and when he says that it is a sentence with a gavel.

"Come with me instead," I tell the woman. She cannot hear me. For her, fear is deaf. I touch her arm and she jumps away. I wish that you were here, because you always knew how to call me away from the things that were hurting me. But now it is just me, and I must do this alone.

“Listen to me,” I say. I tell her that I do not know who this person is, but she does not have to go with him. I tell her that I will take her wherever she wants to go. The man glares at me and asks me who do I think I am, but he does not know that I cannot see his face. I take the woman’s hand, like you used to take mine, and I pull her with me out of the bar. “Run,” I tell her, because I know what happens when we run. She runs with me, over the mountains that are dark and still. I look down to see our feet, but we are not flying. We stay on the ground. Still we run, even if we cannot fly, under the lamplight of the sleeping town. We run as far and as fast as we can, until we are safe, until everything is right and there is no more fear. “Will you be okay? Can you go on alone now?” I ask the woman, and she nods, and she says through her panting breath that she is brave enough now, although I know that she was brave all along.

When we went camping, the animals crowded around you. We could talk to them. We could read their colors and they knew our thoughts. We crept out of our tent in the early morning, while our parents were still sleeping, and we tiptoed through pine needles so that no one would wake up. We sat at a stream. A turtle nuzzled your leg, and you stroked his head. A woodpecker sat on my arm with his chest bright red and yellow. A flock of sheep came to drink from the creek, bleating rose petal cries of pink and orange, and when they saw us, they were unafraid.

“What will happen when we are old and our skin sags and our eyes are foggy?” I asked.

“Hush,” you said, because whoever you were, and wherever you came from, you were not worried about the things that worried me. We heard our parents waking up and wondering where we were, and our father’s voice grew louder and yelled for us until it paled, but you told me that whatever happened when we got back, whatever anger or darkness we must face, we could survive, we were strong. So we buried our faces in the animals’ fur, and we forgot everything else.

I drive to the coast. It is not the Gulf Coast with its bright birds and warm, sticky air. This coast fills my body with cold. I walk over the rocks crusted with the sea, and one pierces my foot. My blood mixes in the cold water and turns gray. Clams shoot saltwater into the air as they burrow underground. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself, as if they were enough to warm me. In the distance a boulder towers in the sky. I climb it, and when my knees scrape against its side and my skin is peeled away I feel nothing. Standing on top of the rock I can see for miles and miles. I see the orcas that leap high above the sea as if they are trying to escape its pull. I see the fishing boats that catch salmon to ship across the country. I see pelicans and great blue herons that swoop to the ocean to steal fish for their young. I feel the coast groan beneath me at the endless struggle of death that sustains life. I remember the woman, alone and free now, courageous, and I remember the swallow flying strong through the thin, cold air, and I remember you. I climb down from the rock.

Now I step into the ocean. The tornado ringing in my ear absorbs the sound of the waves. I watch a faded jellyfish squirm past, and I reach my finger out and touch it. The salt foams at my ankles. I do not know what I will find when I swim out. I still hope that somehow, at the end of something, some height or some depth or some distance, I will find you again. That you will hold my hand and we will watch the colors of the world dance around us like we once did. That all I must do is swim far enough, or climb high enough, or fall deep enough.

But maybe at the world's end I will find life without you. Maybe I will find that a colorless life is bearable, that I can be strong, even when my feet no longer fly and the world does not grow and spin and change just for me. And so I swim. I am unafraid. I swim to whatever waits for me. I swim until I am no longer cold, until I am no longer tired. I swim until the boulder is only a pebble in the distance. And when I think I can swim no more, I stretch out my fingers and pull myself one more arm's length, into the horizon.