

Elpenor

The evening was dim and starless. Honed by hour-old rain, the cold winds cut my clothes. They always felt thinner when we visited the cemetery, my clothes; the wind sharper. There was something about the Autumn evenings, about the smell of humid air that brought us to the Anglican cemetery. I braced for a heavy swell, anchoring my feet against the grey, paved path. I acted like the wind really could have carried me away, but it was not so blunt, and I was not so light and willing. Bracing was an exercise in belief, in practice. It was just as likely that the wind would have toppled the wall between the cemetery and Her Majesty's Penitentiary. Perhaps they planned them to be right next to each other to warn the inmates they could not get far, if they could see the tombstones from their windows.

During the cold, damp days of Autumn, the borders of life and death were vague and unimportant. I never noticed when they reemerged in Winter or Spring. The borders can only be noticed when distractions are gone and death again begins to creep into the world. While we walked to the cemetery my father recited the names of those who were swept away by the tides. Tommy Moore, Wally Ryan, Charlie and Johnny Rendell, Winst Cochrane, etc. All of them lost to the ocean while he was growing up in Heart's Content. The way he said their names—always Charlie and Winst, never Charles or Winston—was familiar. It was as if they had just shared a pint. That was a symptom of the Autumn air, too, how easily the names came out. Over Christmas he recited a longer set of proper Christian names with his eyes downcast into a glass of hot rum. Already the boundary was building; the names came out stiff as the rum. When his face was good and red he called his Mom and thanked her for keeping him in school. "There but for the grace of God go I," he said. Even still there was guilt in his voice, as if things could be different.

So we walked along the tombstones and my father added the names of those lost in the bay. Their names hung in the air between the stones. When we reached Alex's grave, my father read his name, too. "Alex Fitzpatrick, 1979-1998," he said, one hand in his pocket. "I wonder if his name . . .

Irish, of course, but I wonder if they thought of the Greek. Alex—Alexander Fitzpatrick. Funny his parents buried him here.”

He took two beer from his pocket and placed them on the damp earth. I knelt and opened both beer then poured them over Alex’s gravesite. I crossed two drum sticks where I imagined Alex’s chest, then crushed the cans and put them on either side. The beer was my father’s idea. We couldn’t find Oland so settled for some Alexander Keith’s. Maybe that was what brought Alex’s full name to mind. When my father first met Alex, he was over drinking beer. We listened to the CDs he brought from the mainland—The Clash, Earth, Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, all those. Alex leaned into music, to identify with it, to listen to it as an oracle. He was drinking Oland then—Oland export. He explained that he grew up by the factory in the industrial north end of Halifax. He was homesick and heavy with nostalgia. My father joined us and when he stood up he smiled and said he couldn’t understand a thing the songs were about.

Alex always fancied himself a drummer, even despite the painful swelling in his hands. He said so long as he could hold the sticks in his twisted fingers, he would learn to play. His hands were often red and swollen. Some days they caused him enough pain that I insisted on taking notes for him in class. He refused, of course, saying it’s better for fingers be gnarled around a pen than a machine. Besides, his other joints hurt and he couldn’t stop using them. Alex told me that his father had bad hands, too, that he felt every movement as his fingers twisted out of place. The claws they became were only good for filing welfare applications.

A night in November Alex and I walked George street. We opened a bottle of Lamb’s rum and shared sips. Alex went up to a few of the hard sleepers—that’s what he called them—on Water and that area and troubled out a few dollars from his pockets. “Stay warm my friend,” he said. A bit farther down the road, I offered to screech him in. I was far from comfortable with the ceremony, but Alex’s kindness made me want to connect myself to him in some way. He had brought up the ceremony months ago; the come from awayers always mention it. I told him it was bogus, but he still bothered me

about it. He was a citizen of the world, he said. He wanted what little novelty life offered. I didn't know then that he was trying to wedge a life into twenty-five years, before his hands went bad and the pain unbearable. So we picked up a fresh cod at the Fish Depot and performed the ceremony in a parking garage. "What do I again?" he asked. I told him to sing whatever he wanted.

"O, my Dark Rosaleen

Do not sigh, do not weep!

The priests are on the ocean green,

They march along the Deep

There's wine . . . from the royal Pope,

Upon the ocean green;

And Spanish ale shall give you hope,

My Dark Rosaleen!

He sang it to the tune of an old shanty. We threw the fish to the curb after the ceremony was finished. Before we left the parkade, gulls flocked down and dismantled the fish. Alex stopped for a moment and rubbed his hands. "The seagulls are so big here," he said. "They have wings like angels." He insisted we walk to the waterfront to feel the wind and watch the gulls circle the bay.

Nobody in his family had gone to university before, he told me. Most hadn't graduated high school. But Alex was smart and grades came easy to him. Memorial gave him scholarship enough to get away from his family on the mainland, and he celebrated a successful first year by attending his roommate's house party. I left the party early, and he shared a joint with me before I walked home. I knew later in the night the hard stuff would come out. I always left those parties early. But Alex liked anything that would make him forget himself. Some drugs made him feel too much, made his thoughts too present. Heroin was the drug of choice, when he would get it. He said that if, in the end of all this, he had to work like his father and be crippled, he'd rather overdose. Age twenty-five, thirty at most. He smiled as he told me this and I thought he was joking. Now I can only see the sincerity in his eyes.

Someone at the party was supposed to watch him shoot up—systems like this were always in place—but I didn't know who. When I asked about Alex the next day, they protected each other as if I were an outsider. And when I asked they protected each other as if I were and outsider. And I was, in a way. Alex was my only entrance into that world. If we had not been their roommates, I would have never spoken to them. Now, at least, they apologized for defending themselves.

Alex's body was recovered in the harbour that evening. My father knew nothing. I told him that Alex had too much to drink and fell. Whether he knows different he never mentioned. I remember the pain on my father's face when I told him that Alex fell. He accepted the death immediately but looked at me with concern. My first year of university was no new beginning. That summer was slow and closed, and I struggled in classes. The nights got porous and I stayed in bed, lights out, listening to the CDs Alex left behind. Some nights I shook myself to sleep. With the one rope I tossed to violently rent, I too was sinking. We both felt this, and when my mid-term assessments came back my father brought home two cans of beer and a small battery-powered CD player, insistent that we visit Alex's grave. His voice was tinted with Christmas guilt.

The beer ran slow down the hill in a yellow-white froth. The soil was too shallow, too dense to penetrate. I looked back to my father. He was looking out to the saltwater lake opposite, watching a yellow-capped fisherman cast into the lake. The cold howled. My father sheltered his hands in his pockets and walked toward the gate. He kicked a roll of sod left leaning on the iron fence. There were two new graves there, dark and difficult to see. The beer flowed down towards them and sunk into the fresh dirt. "Nice to know he's here so we can visit him," my father said. He unfurled the sod over the new grave plots. It was cut perfectly to cover them.

"What are you doing? If someone sees you we'll both be in shit."

"Let them. Nobody knows who's supposed to be here. Besides, it's a sin to leave them like this." He spoke without turning. My father frustrated me with his strange reverence for the dead.

“Does grass protect them?” I asked, but he didn’t answer. I figured it only pushed them farther away, like when the snow falls and whites out the tombstones. Both plots were covered and my father came back to me. “I’m finished,” I said. My father put the crushed empties into a small plastic bag.

My father tied the bag by the handles and wiped his hands on his jeans. The bag whipped about in the wind. My father did not brood. The emotions would come to him and do their work, but once they were done he had no use for them. Even on Christmas, after he recited the names of those lost to the waters, he would take a long swig of hot rum and stand up to play with our young cousins or otherwise work on his lesson plans for when school went back in. For him, there was always life to get on with. So we left the cemetery with the two crushed cans. At the end of the path, my father took a wrong turn. He stopped behind the fisherman and looked into his large bucket. There must have been two dozen fish in there. Brook trout, shad, rainbow smelt, salmon, and a slew of smaller creatures that might have been fallen leaves and sprigs. My father whistled. “Bitin’ well today?” he asked the fisherman. “Didn’t know there was salmon here.”

“Oh yes, me son,” the man lifted the rain-beaded rim of his cap, “just waits long enough.” His old face was wrinkled by smiles and there was a salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin. He treaded out of the water and tapped the bucket with his foot. Fish jolted and swam in circles. A gull circled and shouted at us. It was a young bird, still with mottled brown in its feathers.

“Are you selling?” My father asked. “Me and the boy want to cook something up later and the freezer’s near empty.” They haggled and my father came to agreement to buy the whole bucket.

“And takes you that gull, too,” the old fisherman said and put the cash in his long wading boot. He laughed and wiped the condensation on his upper lip. I tried to pull my father aside to remind him we still had to walk a long ways and that the bucket would be too much to carry. He wouldn’t listen. He bent over and strained his knees trying to lift the damn thing, so I helped him. The handle was large enough that two could hold it comfortably. “We’ve got his bucket,” my father said. “He won’t be doing any more fishing. Let’s go till he’s out of sight.” My shoulders locked in place as we strafed down

along the lake. The bucket's handle burned cold in my hands. We rounded the corner to a small stone beach and spotted the fisherman's bright cap moving away from us. We put the bucket down and stretched.

"We can't carry this all the way home," I said, adamant.

"The bucket? We'll find a use for it," my father replied, "maybe your uncle would want it." The brown gull landed and shouted again to get our attention. It watched us in profile, patient. My father motioned for us to carry the bucket farther and so we removed our shoes and walked it toward the lake. Our feet hit the water and my father slowed, but we waded on until the lake rose in small, pin-prickling tides nearly to our waists. When we hit the gravelbar shoal I couldn't feel my hands or feet. My chest shivered. Slow and careful my father lowered the bucket over the shoal's edge and the lake rushed in, lifting the fish free of the bucket. In a great burst, then one by one, they fluttered out, into the water. A few seemed dazed, so my father put his hand under them and drew them into the lake.

"Don't make light of this," my father said to them. He must have seen my confusion. "It's a chance to live, even if only a day more." We jostled the bucket but still there were creatures sunk to the bottom, dead. I turned back to the seagull who paced the stone beach, careful not to get close. I put my hand in the bucket and tossed a dead fish to the bird. It screeched in delight and ran up to us with its large wings spread. My father watched the gull fly off with the small fish in its mouth. He thought for a moment. "They deserve it, too," he said.