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## *Diptych: Chrysalis, Prayer*

### 1. A Memory of Chrysalis

One winter when the boys were young we visited a friend of my sister who lives in the mountains near a small pond where we skated. Lacking neighbors, my sister's friend rescues wild animals, especially birds of prey, and at the time we visited, was keeping one owl permanently in her home and two hawks, still mending before their release. All the birds had yellow eyes.

It was hard to tell what excited the boys more—the yellow-eyed birds or the promise of skating.

Each took to the ice according to his temperament, just as he had learned to swim—the older one determinedly mastering the biomechanics of stride and stroke, the younger one throwing himself into the water or onto the ice in a near ecstatic frenzy of motion.

As for me, bliss. No harm could fall to them here; we were out of the city.

I'd been a serious child myself, an interior girl who buried herself in books and, at least until late in adolescence, was loathe to exercise at all.

Then I learned to hike.

Of course, I had been hiking all my life, forced into it by Girl Scouts and, occasionally, my parents, but like my own sons after me, experienced it as torture.

A child's view of nature is detached, for what is nature to the child? It lies inert and unresponsive. You can throw rocks at it, but the rocks don't do anything back, just disappear, plop, into water, and then you have to find another rock. Also, nature is hot and uncomfortable, or cold and uncomfortable, and painful—your muscles ache, your chest burns. In later years you will come to crave this feeling, but for now you hate the trail and everything about it, including your parents.

All that changed when I fell in love and learned to follow the strong lines of my boyfriend's back deep into the woods, just as later I'd follow the lines of other men's backs up steep mountain trails, over improbable passes, along the rugged banks of mountain streams, although by then I would no longer know if it were the man or the trail I was following.

For it would be on these trails that I would grow, at long last, into my body.

Watching my sons on the ice that day, it struck me how much at home they already were in their compact boys' bodies, the little one falling and falling and laughing and claiming he liked to fall, the bigger one making his determined progress until he could outskate me and my bliss.

I couldn't know then how short-lived this

would be, although I'm not sure why I did not anticipate the self-consciousness that would come to each boy as his body betrayed him, increasing in size and plainly visible for all to see. Looking back into my own life it's impossible to pinpoint the moment this happened to me, for who retains a memory of chrysalis?

But when it happened to the boys, it took my breath away. One day, the older boy bent to the ground, clasped a rock in his hand, and then paused ever so slightly, as if he were thinking about it, before rising to loft it toward the far other side of the river. One day, the younger one clambered up the rocks above the banks from which he had flung himself year after year, and then paused ever so slightly before hurling himself off the ledge and into the frigid water below.

It would be years between those moments and when the boys would learn, finally, to manage the self-consciousness burgeoning inside their hesitations and become, like most of us, merely particular about their clothes, their socks, their haircuts, but during those years they could still sometimes summon the grace and abandon they'd once had on the ice where my sister's friend's unnatural birds perched on the inside waiting for them.

We returned to the house chilled and happy that day, the smaller boy bruised and over excited, the bigger one quietly accomplished. I'd turned an ankle but it wasn't bad. Although I was cold and looking forward, like the boys, to some hot chocolate or maybe a hot toddy, I hated that we were leaving, for now that we'd turned away

from the ice we'd begun our long retreat back to the city. But before we left, my sister's friend's husband wanted to show us his rocks.

The bigger boy, serene in his achievement, slipped his hand in mine to show himself to be compliant and interested, but the little one, as ever, careened about, spilling his hot chocolate and resisting any effort to engage him as we were led to a small and darkened room.

Have you ever seen a fluorescent rock? the husband said to my sons, not me.

And then he turned the lamp off, leaving us in total darkness until the younger boy calmed down a bit, before turning on his ultraviolet light and transforming their known world, for ever to see such minerals fluoresce is a wondrous thing. Most, in their natural sate, are dull and gray, constitutively rock-like, but bathed by the right UV spectrum of light, invisible to the human eye, they ignite with neon intensity and astonishing color. That they contain such radiance has always seemed miraculous to me, every bit as miraculous as how still my younger boy was made by their glowing. I could feel him beside me in the darkness, not moving, hardly even breathing, a cry of surprise and delight caught deep in his chest. A sensitive boy for all his rambunctiousness, he was held, in that moment, by mystery, and as my hand sought his shoulder, I felt flooded with relief and love, both boys sidling up close to lean their heads against my hips, where even now I can feel the trace of their rapture.



## 2. Dead Boys at Play

Death was never more familiar to me than when I was ten, a girl who grew up expecting it to come at any moment, most likely at night, on a global scale. I'm not sure why I took to it so keenly. Other children went about their games of jumping rope and playing ball oblivious of mortal risk, while I steeled myself to the daunting task of holding off nuclear annihilation or other forms of natural disaster with my imagination, a huge responsibility, at least until we all had finished high school.

And so it was that I became the nighttime guardian of my family home and took upon myself the bedtime chore of locking up, just for an excuse to slip unnoticed out into the backyard to observe a private ritual, like prayer, a taking in of everything—stars, the quiet brush of water in the riverbed below, all the particular scents of each season, fresh air on my skin—for of course I knew, by morning, it could all be gone.

Thus, when the boy fell from the railroad trestle that crossed the river below my house, rending the hot summer air with his cries, or the sister of the girl in my class fell from the water tower on the hill behind school where we were forbidden to play, crushing her skull, I looked upon each accident as a warning or precursor, although in other respects, my response was complex.

When I was very young, the father of a girl who lived down the street died unexpectedly of an aggressive brain tumor. Even now, I remember him as a big man with huge tufts of coarse,

gray hair for eyebrows and an avuncular warmth that stirred feelings more appropriate to a father in me. Maybe if the news had come from a grown-up, but it was the girl, his daughter, who told me he'd died, and at first, I could not take it in. We had climbed the old oak in front of my house, and giddy with the excitement of having a playmate—a rare occurrence for me—I did not believe her.

Liar, I said to the girl, who ran home crying.

Shame, my mother said. Shame on you, she said, to turn on your friend in her grief.

But here is the part I can't explain: an architect, the dead man had designed his home to be full of the very glass and light I'd want for myself in later years, and now that I have finally come to live in my own, small mid-century home that, like his, invites the canyon woods outside in through a rear wall of glass, I better understand the child that was me who, still shamed a week or so later, stood waiting to apologize in the house of mourning, blasted by the midday sun and with the cottonwoods and river pressing in from the back, but yet transfixed instead by a single corner of the floating hearth, strangely swaddled in surgical gauze. A mother of sons, I know now that this was most likely to protect the toddler brother of the girl I'd accused, but at the time it struck me as terribly wrong, an anomaly the architect would never have allowed.

And so I thought what I thought—*I wonder if that's where he died*—and for years after that I dreamed of fireplaces, of falling through chimneys, of perishing in them.

What I mean is, as a child, I had a close familiarity with death, but later, when it came to touch the lives of my own sons, it was utterly insensible to me.

The first dead boy took a baseball in the head. A teammate of my older son, slight, but athletic, with a toothy grin and unquenchable love of the game, the boy had been ready and excited when I'd picked him up earlier, his gear in a bag and his cleats slung over one shoulder, while my own son, who had lost his mitt, was sullen and unpleasant. They'd squabbled, as boys do, and I had fumed—nine times out of ten I did the carpool.

Boys, I had said. Please, boys.

Now, for the rest of my life I will wonder what I might have said or done differently had I known how little time remained before my son's small body would coil itself on the pitching mound, one shoulder hunched, face tucked like a bird's in the crook of his arm where I knew—if I could only see it—his brow would be furrowing, the way it always did, with an intensity of concentration that still astonishes me. Any second now it would all unwind—you could almost hear him inhale—and he'd burst into motion, spinning his body into its strong lunge and whipping his arm up over his head to pitch a fastball—his best—straight at the plate. And still, he was holding his breath—you could almost hear this too—in his terrible hope, now evident for all to see, that this one, nearly perfect pitch would be, for the boy at the plate, the third strike and out, but no. How well I remember—will always remember—the little, dejected slump of his shoulders as the bat

made its contact with a solid whack, and then we all turned—all of us turned—as one with my son still slumped on the mound to follow the arc of the ball back over the field, all of us holding our collective breath as it traced its immutable path toward the dead boy, who was not yet a dead boy but still an alive-and-breathing, ten-year-old outfielder—the same irrepressible boy who, not two hours before, had been bickering with my son in the back seat of our car—aloft in his leap for the improbable catch, his small freckled face radiant with blinding sun and his own buoyant hope for catching the ball.

The second dead boy slipped beneath the surface of a lake, murky with sediment and the greenish brown of algae, while away on a sleepover field trip to study nature. I wasn't there, but my younger son was. He and the dead boy, I've been told, had been playing *I'm drowning* all morning. Because I wasn't there, I don't know what he said, my son, at the time, when, white-faced and shivering, he stumbled from the water to alert the moms on the shore clumped together in gossip. But I do know that he knew the fake drowning game they had been playing for hours was against the rules.

And did you ever hear the story *Never Cry Wolf*. Did you, little boy? Did you, did you, did you?

Of course, I do not know, either, what the dead boy's mom said to my son, but I think she must have shaken him. I think she must have grabbed him by the shoulders and not let go, her big face screaming right up close to his small one, because



that's exactly what I would have done to someone else's white-faced boy who'd been playing *I'm drowning* with my living, breathing, ten-year-old son, and who'd just stumbled shivering out of the brown water to tell what had happened, shaken the boy—any boy—and screamed in his face, *where? Where is he now?*

*There*, my son must have said, and pointed to the lake.

*There.*

And the still fresh feel of the second dead boy's hand gripping at his own boy bony shoulder, the cold hand clutching, and my stern lesson—*save yourself*—pulling him away.

At least the first dead boy went out in the full blast of radiant sun.

With my own second boy always so fearful of the dark.

And where were the grown-ups anyway—wasn't anyone watching?

When they were ten and lost their friends, it took my breath away. My boys were never raised

to huddle under desks and calculate the half-life of radiation; they didn't know that children of the atom bomb left shadows etched in concrete. They were *just little boys*.

And if it didn't happen this way, if the boy who threw the ball or played the drowning game were not my boy but some other mom's boy, if my boys knew the dead boys only slightly—teammates on sports teams who attended different schools—still they lay awake at night, their small boy dreams shattered, and of course I did too—*for what if it had been them?*

So what I would do was get up to wander the nighttime paths toward solace of that house, just to check on their sleep, feigned or not, and touch the damp down of their cheeks. Later, I would call them on their cell phones just to say, what's up. Now that they're fully grown, weeks can go by before they return even a text, but sometimes still I wake up in the night with a clutch of dread and heart, and if I had a prayer it would be this: *thank God it was not I who lost a boy at play.* 