

I can't do this anymore. I'm sick of being drawn and quartered every waking minute of my life. Surrounded by blind sages who try to tell me what to see and deaf bards who tell me what to hear. People who are so afraid to die, to lose what mediocre joys they hold on to, that they never dare to live. To throw all of one's willpower behind this race against time to relive the same life already lived out generation after vain generation. I'd sooner set sail into a thunderstorm and feel nature's wrath against my corpse than sit another day in warm complacency. And why do they insist I follow their path? Why have they raised me to feel shame, then shamed me for who I've become? What does it matter to them? I did not choose this conscience, nor to be born at all. Dear God, at least give me the agency over my own suffering. Does it really matter to them so much what I do with my self, whether I laugh or cry, close my eyes or throw a chair across the room, where I spill my blood or dig my grave? Perhaps, they are too afraid of what might happen if they thought, for once in their lives, because they might see how fragile the pillars of their comfortable lives are and, upon closer inspection, watch it crumble and themselves plummet into this void of passion, despair, and endless contradictions, paradoxes, and hypocrises.

So you see it then? That you contradict yourself, are conflating your laziness with wit, and are a greater hypocrite than any of them. Did you not once live a decent life of comfortable complacency, enjoying what momentary pleasures lay gifted in front of you? Were you not once a brilliant and enthusiastic player of the game, that is to say, ordinary? I seem

to recall you more than once throwing a tantrum over a toy that your parents refused to buy you. Perhaps a shameful memory to you now; you, who are all so grown up that you sneer at frivolity; now, that you have much grander ambitions than climbing the neighbour's fence. God gave you such a restless soul that once served you well for many a juvenile adventure. I see that these subdued fires have not died in you. But those days of careless content are long gone and will never return. The nostalgia for what is now blurred and indistinct may be a source of both comfort and pain to you. You have grown older, you have seen the world in all its beauty and its shit, but for all that, you fear that you have grown none the wiser. That is, you are no wiser than the boy who would lose himself for entire days in the brilliantly colourful mundanity of his domestic world, as opposed to who he is now, he who sails across the globe and sees only grey.

You speak sweetly, my dear friend, but speak of nothing I haven't already told myself. Why bother tormenting me with reminiscences of a time that you admit yourself I can never return to? You knowingly repeat my own thoughts and words back to me as if they might sedate me any more than drink or smoke. Please, next time you come to me, bring a bottle and cigars so we might be briefly contented.

I need not remind you then?

I recall exactly who I once was, and miss it sorely. But somehow, some way, something happened along the way. Without my realizing it, I either lost or gained something

valuable. Whatever it was, this mark of Cain, it has condemned me to this solitary path. Try as I might to go back, solitude carries me like a swiftly flowing river, and the harder I resist, the greater my suffocation. And the great irony of it all is that I bear this curse proudly, boast it, look down on those without it. Just as some people cling to wealth or children, I am infatuated with my own melancholy, my oldest friend, hold him close to my heart and refuse to let him go.

And so you see, that nothing happened to you, you never lost nor gained anything, you only grew into yourself, became who you were destined to become all this time. You have grown no wiser but no more dull than your childhood self. You are now who you always were and he was then what you are now, somewhere inside. But the world around you has changed greatly. Your body has grown taller, your limbs have grown stronger, your face has grown angular, austere. The people around you have grown too, and now they expect things of you. They busy themselves with new constructions and anxieties and you do too. You are no different than them, just because you see through it all, that these really are just convoluted constructions and pointless anxieties. Many before you and around you have seen the same, but still play the game with no less fervour. And so you too must play the game, devote yourself wholly to its senseless rules. You too will enjoy it, be enraptured by it. You are playing it even now, with far greater conviction than all those around you. But, remember that, at the end of the day, it's all just a game. Remember that, and laugh.

I remember it, but I'm not laughing now, am I? What is it with all of you and your obsession with playing this God-damned game? Your paradoxes and aphorisms serve no greater purpose than to perpetuate the playing of this game. Those of us that keep playing do so only by telling ourselves silly little stories such as these.

You try so hard to sail directly against the wind. Please, come to shore and sit for a while, see that there is an easier way. Perhaps you will laugh when you lay on the beach at night and listen to the chatter of waves receding across those thousand rocks, under a sky of ten thousand stars. And that crescent moon's reflection sails across the transient waves whose singing tides breathe in and out to the rhythm of you. After all, it is all you, and you are it. You are just another rock laying on this shore, and each rock is just another you. And your whole world, everybody you've ever known and loved, every panorama that's ever taken your breath away, every sunset, sunrise, mountain, ocean, star, constellation, night sky, every frothy seafoam you've ever touched, all this universe is just another tiny seafoam, among countless others, formed in an instant by the inhaling tide, and vanished just as quickly by the inevitable exhale. Listen to the world around you breathe in, and out, a hundred thousand universes being created and destroyed with each breath. Uncountably many of you, each laughing, dancing to the same entrancing rhythm.

Oh, please, please I beg you, I've heard enough of your siren songs. You make me want to tear myself apart so that one half of me might lay down and rest whilst the other half beats the earth with broken and bloodied fists. Your voice is balm to my soul, you know that as well as I do, and I reluctantly find myself once again on the verge of surrender to your verbal intoxication. But, I don't want to keep doing this anymore, seeking solace in this temporary drunken wisdom. Oh, how we're all drunk on something, after all, we'll drink anything to keep ourselves going: alcohol, money, children, God, circular philosophizing, academia, art, moments of clarity, love, faith, zen, nihilism, dreams... We tell ourselves stories to keep ourselves playing the game, and so, it's twisted folk like me who have no choice but to tell ourselves all sorts of paradoxes and inarticulable wisdoms to stay afloat. We cope with our own torment by giving ourselves such pithy commands as 'you have to play the game' and when we get sick of playing the game, resorting desperately to some sort of enlightenment from silver-tongued rhetoricians like you telling us that it is all just a game, telling all these enigmatic bedtime stories in a voice so seductive and a laughter so compassionate that one cannot help but laugh and cry too. But I'm sick of all that, I'm sick of my torment being met with grace and compassion, I'm sick of telling myself stories, I'm sick of laying down and gazing at a sky full of stars, I'm sick of chasing after that sub-marine tranquility, I'm so terribly sick of being addicted to this beautiful sickness. God, I wish I could just look myself in the eye and say without saying it: not another word.

The friend remained silent. In the dim light of two crescent moons and twenty thousand stars, the man could not tell whether this sudden reticence was out of troubled thoughtfulness or thoughtless quietude. If he had looked closer, he would see the wavering reflection of the night sky in his old friend's eyes. Perhaps, he thought, his friend had fallen asleep.

Hey, you still awake?

Yeah.

Are you tired?

A bit. Are you?

Yeah, but I don't think I can fall asleep now.

He lay silently for a moment, then closed his eyes. He spoke softly, matching the lyric tempo of the tide.

A boy sits atop a boulder in the middle of the river. Idly, he watches the water crash against the bow of his unmoving ship, split off to the left and right of it, and, amid foam-lipped eddies, the water recombines and continues on its constant course. He is entranced by the way the water moves seemingly without moving at all, each crest, trough, and foamy cap is in the exact same spot as the day before, yet fallen leaves and frothy rafts rush past in a great hurry. The river's voice is gently deafening, constant, and seemingly sounding from inside himself, such as when he covers his ears and places his head beneath the bath faucet. It resonates with something deep inside of him that no surgeon could ever extract. It is for this voice that he cannot hear his mother's calling out to him to come in for supper, and it is for these sights that he does not notice the sun drifting under the swaying treetops, casting his boulder in alternately golden light and darkness. When he dips his toes into the wake, he feels the summer day's warmth drain from him. In doing so, he is careful not to fall in. He has watched tree branches larger than himself torn from drooping boughs and thrashed against boulders. The boy finds this river an enigma. It seems to him endlessly compassionate, patient, presiding over so many hours of his joyful content, yet the river seems also cold and apathetic. Gifts of flowers and berries get carried away by the current just the same as rotting logs and muddy leaves. The river would just as soon drag him by his feet and throw him against the rocks as it would caress him and wash his wounds clean. The boy realizes that the river does not care about him, and for this, he fell in love. And so it goes, it was only when the indigo night had sunk in and the faint

impression of stars could be made out that his worried mother found him and broke him from his trance so that he might realize how cold and hungry he was. Back inside, it was warm, and there was food, books, toys, television, and games so that, for the time being, he might forget about the river.

Years later, the boy returns once more, much taller than before. This time with a friend, an older boy, whom he thought he might impress by showing him this river. They splash about in the shallow pools near the riverbank, climbing the overhanging tree branches and jumping back in. They chase each other across the river itself, jumping from boulder to boulder. At times, they slip and nearly fall in to the turbulent wash, imagining briefly the dire consequences, but secretly being thrilled by it. They make it to a large boulder in one of the deepest sections, one that he could never reach when he was younger. The older boy stands triumphantly atop it, drying himself in the sun. He looks around the landscape as if having conquered it. The younger lies on his back staring up at him, seeing his companion for the first time in a new light, whose highlights and shadows outline the contours of a body so much more powerful than his own. The older boy catches his stare and kneels down beside him. He gently touches a cut on the younger boy's ankle and examines the blood on his own fingers. Then, he caresses his head and kisses it on the temple. They lay next to each other for a while, watching the trees way overhead and listening to their hushed sways, as if telling each other the secrets of everything they've seen.

The next time the boy returns to the river, it is winter, and he no longer resembles a boy, but a wearied man of worldly ways. His face looks troubled and serious, his gait long and tired. He sits on the river bank and spitefully recalls those vanished years since he once played carelessly atop these boulders. He has returned on this day with the vague hope that he might find something he had lost. Or, perhaps, in patiently listening to the river's eternal wisdom, learn something he now, more than ever, desperately needs. He sits there as still as he can, focuses hard on tuning his ears to the river's voice. He listens forcefully, for something, anything, that might rescue him from his own shattered conscience. And yet, he hears nothing, but the cold wind that whistles a careless tune and seeps in through his collar, draining him of what little warmth he has. And the constant roar of the mindless river, that drowns out his anguished pleas for salvation. He feels the chatter in his own skull well up inside him, threatening to burst wide open. This river is a fraud. It has no words, no wisdom, no heart, no soul, no truth. It flows stupidly, running its meaningless course without ever even asking why. He envies it so, and hates it more. God, please, he begs, give me something, tell me a tale that will save me from this world, save me from myself, take me back to that warm home with my bed and my books where I might be contented once again by toys and tender kisses. Between choked up sobs, he hears the voice of his mother calling out to him once again. He gets up and follows the voice to a supper he knows is no longer there. As he is leaving, he vows never to return, and he looks back to say goodbye, as if

expecting the river to say something, at least a farewell in return. But, of course, he hears nothing.

Long years, decades, go by. The river carries on as it always has, minutely changing its course with the rise and fall of its waterline, the slow erosion of its rocky banks. By the time the boy returns for the final time as an old man, even the river looks different. The old man says hello, to an old friend, but does not expect a response. He balances precariously on the same rocks that he remembers once leaping off of as a youth. Carefully, and with all his remaining strength, he fords across the river to the boulder he fondly recalls. He sits and listens for a while, listens to the symphony of currents crashing against itself. Night falls, but he does not notice his hunger nor cold. Without knowing how exactly, he finds himself in the water, carried along swiftly by the river's powerful current. Rocks and tree branches strike or fly past him, the underwater roar ebbs and flows in his ears. The stars and the moon and the trees watch from overhead, all distorted through the river's turbulent surface. The water is cold, but he feels strangely warm inside. So, fixated on the brotherly indifference of the night sky, the old man watches the world close its eyes and fall asleep, dreaming of tomorrow.

When he wakes up, he is no longer a he, but finds himself, instead, a tree. He remembers nothing of being a person, in fact, he does not think of anything at all. He is a tree, after all. As a tree, tree trees all day and night for years and years and years. Tree watches how the birds bird and the sun suns. Tree watches the river river, just as it always has. Tree

trees, overtime, into a marvelously big and strong tree, with tall branches that reach up towards the sky, deep roots that dig into the earth, and thick boughs hanging over the river. One day, for the first time, tree notices a people peopling. A little girl, hardly tall enough to reach tree's lowest branch, climbs tree's trunk and straddles tree's lowest bough. She stays there a while, watching the river flow past. When, the sun sets and the stars appear, the girl climbs down and goes back home, never to return again.