

“Put it away,” he said. “I am going to die.”

“Oh, you *are* going to die?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “Put it away. I will return just fine.”

All this talk of returning really set me off, too. What if he didn’t return? This was incredibly foolish. To live just to die. And to die so easily.

Blast it. What was going on here? These men were aging before my eyes. These men, these Jobsian derelicts, how could I get them to come around? I thought to get away from this, but then I thought, “It’s only been a day. And it does feel insanely productive, considering that I’ve lived through so much of these men’s lives. I can see all of life this way, not just a few minutes here or there, but years passing all at once.” It was terrifying, but it was hard to tear myself away from.

We trekked back to the camp again and I kept a close eye on my friend, wondering if he would topple over. He talked much about the flutes as we walked together, musing over the little innovations he wanted to add. He talked about a hole he wanted to add. Other men had added holes, but they had never worked, they had always been in the wrong place. He talked about a method of hinging them so they could fold in half and he talked about making flutes out of a paste made of leaves. I asked him what would be the point of leaf-based flutes and he told me that flutes were scarce, so the metal supply was diminishing, making the flutes smaller and smaller. In fact, he had heard that the flutes had once been very large. We arrived at camp and, after all of this talking, he was very short of breath so I asked him if he was alright. He said, “yes,” and he patted my arm and walked down to the flute box.

I stowed my suitcase in the cave again and found the young boy there, now appearing to be in his fifties. I had expected this, and I probably would