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“Memory, Un-Memory & The Inevitable.”

I always remember the trees. Lines and lines of Lobolly Pine and Southern Magnolia that stretched back for what seemed like eternity. Their branches intertwined like boys locking arms in a huddle. My folks were like the trees. Close to each other, interlocked and gathered in everlasting droves. Some grew crooked and drunk and cockeyed. They jutted out in violent slants doomed to splinter and crash. However, most grew straight up. As a child, I would stand at the foot of such trees (and people) and let my small head cascade backwards, straining my neck trying to see the tops. Some so straight and tall I thought they would pierce the sky and send Heaven (or whatever) spiraling down on top of me in some grand white heap. I remember red clay roads. Roads that were not roads but paths beaten hard by pickup trucks and four-wheelers. They rose and sagged and cracked and spit you out at the mouth of an old town. Here, just like everywhere else, nothing ever changed and time went on rushing like water. The myth of this place (which it was, a myth) was told in gold caps, pistols and a rare drawl that oozed, slow like sap and vanished into nothingness, quick. It showed its face in county fairs and roadside flea markets; in the purple cough syrup we were so fond of, and our famed ill-fitting clothing. It showed in our Pine houses, erected by old hands, which peered down on us like scornful Gods from bluffs of red Earth. The floorboards habitually uneven, splintered and discolored. They groaned and wheezed if you walked with too heavy

a step. To sneak around proved impossible. It lived in the Antebellum steeples that had been spared from cannon-fire by Union generals storming through the state crushing mansions and lifting (or lowering) my cousins into serfdom. They had seen war and the treachery of their own countrymen and the continuation of a complicated story. A state where blood money ran fast and unforgiving just like Big Muddy. A state that at one time held more slaves than free citizens. Where businessmen came to get fatter than they already were. This region, fertile in soil and red sky, raped by Spaniards and Frenchman who fled from war with spices and pelts, but left behind their Tuscan columns and surnames. They left a bastard-creole-language, a language that was my fathers and his fathers before him. And now it was mine. We took that language and named our children. We used it to worship, to condemn and curse one another. That world consumed me. I cannot escape it through thought or action or even through death. I can only embrace it with life. To reconcile it means to face it for what it was (is) and who, besides myself it truly belongs to. The fatigue of Western civilization was less realized here. All things came slow and went just the same. Everyone wore the scars their fathers and uncles had given them at birth. We ate and we drank too much. Slow to change and most times not willing to change (stuck). Memories came and never went. Most of our time was lived in Limbo (stuck). There was clutter everywhere and you were always on the cusp of a mistake. No one rose too high or sank too low. People stuck to the ground just like those trees that grew straight up, so straight and tall. Hands and faces charred black (black like the moon) by a far-away star, caked in soot and engine oil. The quietness. It reminded me of forbidden things; things with locks,

doors without locks that were kept closed in adherence of some unspoken law. There was no public transit. No giants beasts blazing across the sky leaving trails of who-knows-what in its wake. Never an inkling of anyone coming or going anywhere. There was a beauty in this infinite and age-old social struggle. The way the spring Magnolia blossomed; so blush and pink. The way they were opened in a moment and blew in the wind the next. In the moon burning, black and cold in the pitch black night. It was in mile-long parkways and acres of forest and fresh water named in reverence of indigenous people who collected scalps of encroaching white men. It was not all Confederate Flags and hog hunts. It was not just rope and fire. There was fire. There was rope. But it was not these things at all, not to me. Not to anybody I knew; and they had lived it. It is alive with blues guitars and footloose people. Dyed by candy-painted Chevys that sat so high off the ground you had to climb into them. They raced down highways at night, under the nose of the State Trooper. Roaring and so fluorescent, they burnt out on gravel roads summoning thick clouds of red dust and exhaust. In the moments that followed, there was a blinding calm. The exhaust would rise and evanesce into the atmosphere. The dust waded in the air, and then sank back to Earth. It settled on your clothes and your skin, assimilating you in the process (Ritual). Subwoofers entombed in twenty-inch deep trunks rattled fiberglass and sheet metal like percussion: *The Southern Mating Call*. It was rich in cultures and sideshows that had gone extinct in most other parts of the country. But most of all, it was a grand show of survival and the refusal of blackness to wilt altogether under atomic pressure and violence. It mirrored the Diasporas of Martinique and Haiti and other places held apart by oceans where once-chained

people built lives on lands that were once cages. Who took strife and transmuted it. It was woven in quilts. It was fired in ovens and reemerged as terracotta. It was my Aunties toe in the pot with red potatoes and Tabasco. Troubled still, forward we go, shedding shards of an identity that was but is no more.

I feel a certain hot-ness, which may very well be fear, in the Southern discomfort that rattles my bones and rides through my blood and into my heart. This same discomfort, or feeling, is what makes my father's eyes so lunar and deep brown. It is what makes his voice soft and his hands hard. It is what made him leave his home for a part of the country gentler to a boy like he was. The myth is in his tough yellow skin, in his back when it aches, and it is present in my own genetic makeup (and yours). The story I know is tangled and tragic. Caught; in a knot of things endless and ever-pursuing. It is so abject, because in its' endlessness it is pre-disposed to future reiterations. Like the way things burn, turn to ash and rise up again to blind our eyes and sully our hands. It is my belief, that our fatal flaw as Americans is not that we are brutes or that our arc of empathy is skewed or archaic. Our fatal flaw is that we fear what the truth about our complicated history says about our own social inheritance. We fear the privilege we have, to in some way, rewrite what has been written, to chain our will onto something bigger than ourselves, to rewire the program. Throughout history, human nature has proved itself pathological and extreme. We may never be able to escape our instincts, our animal-like self. The part that compels us to guard and protect what we can, while

we can, until we can no longer. We love what is not our own and want what we do not have. Everywhere is too small and everyone is too many. We have mounted great peaks to feel the warmth of our collective psyche. At what cost? We lie, tell untruths, and un-remember what gives our mouths a foul taste. We see our own images the wrong things, in the wrong places. This steady and faithful attachment we have to ourselves (and what we want to be our truth) will be our ruin. How long, do you think, before our projected images swallow us whole?

It had always seemed to me that the things we un-remember and the things we remember were opposite. But in truth, they are quite alike. Quite the same. Same in the way that the further you push them away, the closer you draw them into your heart. Positioning one thing here and another thing there. Sliding something one way and something else another way. Far enough away but never actually gone from anywhere.

Somewhere along this jagged and non-linear line that is my own life, it occurred to me. What has happened is never truly behind us and the things that will happen (that we know will happen) are not as far in front of us as we would like to believe. Our collective past and the subsequent future bubbles quietly, before and beside us. It roams septic and untamed just beyond our fingertips. It whispers unintelligibly, choked in gusts of hot wind.