

The Stream Sifter

The lights pass by, glancing across the fog on the windows of the bus: white and orange. It is dark inside, as it is out on the highway, save for the LED strips overhead.

Okay, okay. Searching back, like sifting through the bottom of the stream; feeling through the inky mud until I find the right lump. Please, I need you. Be my eyes:

The lights disappear first, dissolving into the night. And then the night becomes something else: the dark, the outside. The stream is only visible from the outside. It is a slow but constant rush straightaway, and you can see it shining there on nothing like black ice.

I'm stepping into the water now. Pinpoint the moment where it ended, where our futures divide.

Standing on the bridge in the bright air with your chin on the warm metal railing. He is somewhere beside you, but you can't quite see him. Looking into the green water and trying to spot the catfish; you know it's down there, hiding in the mire like a devil in the dark.

That was the first time there was any kind of closeness, you know. That's why the bridge is still there, I think, right at the surface.

Something else is coming loose at the bottom. Tell me what it is.

Doing your makeup in the mirror. You watch your nose for a moment too long and wonder when it got so flat, and then you think that it is sliding from your brow all over your mouth. Getting ready to go out the door, thankful that your nose did not melt all over your dress. It is a white sundress with red polka dots. You pause with your fingers around the handle; the world waits outside, a black monolith.

Why is this important? I don't remember why. Where is he?

Was I nervous? Was he the source of the nervousness?

The water is to my ankles now, warm and cold.

Your first date, although neither of you called it that. Walking down Main Street through the yellow spotlights of passing windows and stopping at every store to look inside. You drag the moment out, keeping the burning excitement in your stomach alive. There is a sharp, dawning disappointment when he tells you that he is leaving after the summer, but you push it away into the dark.

Okay, here we are. The summer, right. I should have called it off there. Then, maybe I would have found someone else, or learned to be happy on my own in time for, you know, before—before it happened. Before the loneliness appeared.

I'm wading in now, breaking through the mist that has settled on the surface.

Hanging out with friends, and things feel different. Like the two of you are tied with an invisible thread at the shoulder, and all day you orbit each other. You both talk as though there is nothing happening between the two of you, and they act as though they cannot tell, but you know there is a difference. There is a sense of embarrassment that feels almost intentional.

Then, in the movie theater that night: sitting in the red-cushioned seats, you scratch the side of the plastic armrest, tracing the molded lining of the cupholder with your fingernail. He lays his hand there, barely open, palm turned upward, and you wonder for the rest of the night if he had wanted you to take it.

I thought that was sweet. It was sort of pathetic though, really; we danced around each other for so long that I got mad about it. Why didn't he say something earlier? We could have spent so much more time together if he had just said something, instead of waiting for me to ask him out. After we broke up, I felt stupid. Like I had wasted all that time trying to figure out if he even liked me in the first place.

I'm going deeper into the stream. We're on the right track.

Sitting in the passenger seat of his car and watching how the darkness flattens under the high beams, as though this moment and all that it entails are so focal that all the world around you loses dimension. There in the car where the passing trees are all there is of the world, you are dislodged, striking the thought that to come back home is to stop time: to step out of the stream miraculously dry.

Right. God, I forgot about this. That was when I started to realize I was maybe in love with him; or maybe that was in retrospect? Do things like that even happen at a specific point, or do I just attribute a point to it later, here? He had just picked me up; not from home, I think I was at the high school. It must have been for my brother's game.

It's dark and the fog is like cotton here, I can't see beneath the water. Something else is floating up ahead of me. I'm wading toward it.

Later, his eyes: in normal time they are a golden blue, but here in the dark they melt into black puddles on his face.

Yes, the eyes! I see the eyes, I think, floating in the stream like jewels. No, not like jewels, like beetles. Like glimmering, drowned beetles.

Here in the dark you talk about the unreal future shimmering somewhere like lightning bugs. The fan is whirring until it isn't even a sound anymore. The lightning bugs are outside of the dark: unmakeable; unmanifest; unreal. That's why they shimmer like that. You are moving closer until the space between your chests disappears, and your hearts become exactly what they are—not a pulse or metronome but a burning muscle that fills your bodies and the air around you.

We're close. I'm not sure what the moment is yet exactly, but I'll know it when I see it.

Keep looking, please.

My knees are in the soft mud now, and the water is lapping against my shoulders. I'm feeling around with my fingertips at the bottom of the stream.

A white memory; a sterile, pumping sound. *Zzzth-ump. Zzzth-ump. Zzzth-ump.*

No. That's not it. Same time, wrong place.

In the car the next morning, your hand is resting uncomfortably in his. The dry dew of the summer air clings to your skin in a thin grime. It is not a bad discomfort though, in the moment; somehow you feel it will be worth it. Light spills in shafts from holes in the sky. Everything beyond you is always only just. One brown leaf is lodged in the hood of the car, shivering in the wind like dancing fingers.

There, that's closer. Show me more.

Still sitting uselessly in the car when he steps out to the gas pump. Little glass droplets shatter on the windshield and run down in slow streams of their own. He is gone from view, somewhere inside the gas station. The car is stuffy and loud.

There's something sharp beneath my index finger. Why this? We're not at the end yet.

The stuffiness and the loudness are filling your head like wool. You feel that it is going to burst through the seams, and the contents of your skull will spill out onto the dashboard.

This is wrong. I want to stop.

The highway is falling sideways past you, and the droplets run faster down the windshield. You are twenty minutes from your parents' house, and this thought cuts through you and makes your heart not a muscle. Home gleams in your mind like an angry beacon. She is not there right now.

This can't be it; it doesn't make sense. Of course I didn't want to go home, and it wasn't because of her. It was because then the moment would end, and then he would leave.

Show me the point where it ended—everything between him and me. I know it's here somewhere.

He's coming back to the car, and you don't know, then, why this is so utterly wrong; like the world is wrong now, in a way you cannot touch. Fundamentally, something is worse than it was, or, maybe, that it never was in the first place. Water pouring over the horizon and breaking above your head. You fall back into the stream, feeling it wash over your face like hot wind.

Please. I don't want to do this anymore.

Dark again: the outside. All that's left is the imprint of your childhood home, glaring.

What? That was it? That wasn't the ending.

I don't feel anything else in the mud. Where is the rest of it? There's nothing else at the bottom of the stream, just this little stone.

What is it? What's next?

Nothing worth remembering. Nothing that was even important enough to remember in the first place.

Please, just tell me what happened. Show me how it ended, where he went. I mean, I know where he went; show me the moment that things stopped being good. Because they were good, I know that, so at some point that stopped. I'm practically up to my nose in the water now. Just show me.

The last few weeks blur by in the way that they should. And then there is one more time that he drops you off at your parents' house, and you do not even consider then that this would be the last time he would do that. That is a thought that you will create later, in the stream.

But that's not the ending, that wasn't even the last time I saw him!

The last time you saw him you were with friends, and the two of you acted as though these memories were all just distant dreams, floating intangibly in the past. This is not the ending because you will see him again, in some way or other, and when the last time does finally come, you will not know that it arrived until it has already left.

I'm not touching the stone. I know what that is, and it's not the ending.

Please, there has to be more. Show me more.

There is no more. Not between the two of you.

Please. Just show me when the loneliness arrived.

Her room. The quiet light of the outside world penetrates the window shades only barely. The bed is empty, made neatly in an unnatural way that it never was when they were both around, save only for the tossed sheets and skewed pillow on one side: the light impression of your father's waking. Everything in the room feels artificial without her: the closed dresser drawers, empty hamper, still ceiling fan.

This was what was waiting for me back home? I only sort of remember it.

It doesn't make you want to cry. It just makes the world heavier.

And she was gone.

In the hospital. The white overhead lights are glaring down at you, waiting in the cushioned hallway seats. Down the hallway, through a closed door, is your mother. Your grandfather is sitting next to you, and you let him hold your hand. It is heavy and coarse, and it occurs to you that you can't remember ever holding his hand before. You have known him for so long, and yet he is so unfamiliar in the white light, with tears on his cheeks: who is this strange man beside you? What in his life could ever have prepared him for this?

It felt so odd to be there with him. I've never known in my life what he was thinking, but then, God... she had been there for my whole life, but he had been there her for all of hers.

I don't think I can do it. I can't see her. If I go any further, I'll drown.

Then don't. You know she is in there, in the room down the hallway. You know that she had wanted to see you, but that she is asleep when you arrive. You know that it's sad; everyone tells you that it's sad that she is dying so young: she had you when she was only nineteen. Really, it's sad because she'll be gone. You know she is there, and you know what is happening to her. You don't have to go into the room.

Okay. Okay. Then I won't.

I know that she's gone. I know that he is too, even if it's different. I just want that time back, to do things differently. No, not even differently. Just to do it exactly the same, again.

You can't, because it's gone. You're aware that this stream, these memories, are not that time either, and wading back in will not bring you there. They're recollections: gathered pieces of what was once felt. Impressions left by time passed.

Fine. I know. I know.

I wrap my fingers around the gnarl, useless little thing.

Seeing his face flash across perception for just a second, finally whole. His mother is a cardinal, and his father is a greyhound, and he looks like neither. Sitting on a couch at a friend's house and you don't really know each other yet. This is not the ending; there is nothing special about this

moment, but it is clear and complete. In the reverse shadow of the musty yellow lamp you see the future, not the half-dead shimmer of the lightning bugs but the real future cast upon your skinny arms:

It is almost what you expect, and then it ends.

That's it. It is a little black thing in my palm, spined, but small and warm. It's all I have.

Do I just let it go? I can't move on, because I don't even know what else there is.

This little gnarl is all there is.

If I let it go, let it wash away in the stream, I won't be able to do this anymore. Go back.

The stream is only visible from the outside. You feel it warm on your skin, but you're aware somewhere in your mind that it will all fade soon enough into nothing. Just air.

I don't know. All of it's still there, somewhere, I think. The car; the lightning bugs.

Somewhere outside of the stream.

All still there somehow, like the catfish in the dark.

I'll let it go.

The darkness is just the night again; the outside is the outside, and the inside is lit with LED strips. White and orange lights on the window. You are in a bus, on a highway. You are going home.