



IV. The Lake Of Broken Sorrows

I spent many days out in the brush.

You never really appreciate the size of the American prairie until you walk through it, and making the journey feels eternal. Every road is vacant, every sign bears the name of a town you've never heard of a hundred miles off, and every abandoned shed or electric antenna feels quiet and removed from the world you know- the one where people exist.

Add to this crushing solidarity the continuous phasing. As I ambled pathetically through the cornstalks and fields of wheat, my mind was frying- an aftereffect of the explosion, one can only assume. I could peer through my hand at the rising moon, I could walk through telephone lines and vaguely make out the internal wiring and splintered wood brushing up against my ethereal face. I saw certain things which I knew did not exist.

Add to this the hunger, the thirst, alleviated only by the occasional water pump which feeds into a faraway stream, and you truly understand the miniscule proportions of the human form in relation to dear Terra. W 2

Near Last Chance, I encountered a dilapidated wreck on the shoulder of the highway. It was an old rusty sedan, the kind of excessive car which has gone out of fashion ever since the German models started getting trendy here in the states. It looked around a decade old from a distance, and as I neared it I wondered if it were so lifeless out here that you could theoretically drive in an area nobody else drove and become lost forever. Like a land equivalent of the Sargasso Sea, trapping cars instead of ships, eating and breathing wayward souls who happened to make the wrong turn.

There was a foreign pink fluid leaking out the door, which had long since clattered off its hinge, and the stuff was stringy and moist. A lone skeleton in the driver's seat rested their arm out the window, transfixed at something straight ahead, and the interior of the car was positively swamped in the pink muck. Cocooned in it. Suffocated.

I stood awhile staring at the car, at the way its rectangular frame stuck out here in the blue swath. It was getting dark and a light chill was setting in, and I assumed that whatever had sucked the lifeblood out of this poor traveler was probably lurking around. The seats and headrests were absolutely bathed in viscera, little meat-looking strands that wound from the ear of the deceased to the dashboard and back.

As I contemplated this scene, the vehicle began to phase. In one moment, out the next, stuttering and flickering like a faulty video signal. In one brilliant and unmistakable flash, the entire thing became transparent, the dead person within and all the banners ~~off~~ gore removed. Nothing but the dusty little pebbles that glinted as the moon crested the horizon.

And there they were, the colonies. Back where I belonged. Just barely visible, small dots on the edge of tranquility, a beacon of humanity's achievements out in this bucolic wasteland. I followed the light, scanning the roadside for edible greens. I knew very little about foraging, never roughed it in my youth, really, however in this case the wild stuff was about my only option.

Later that night- if it was the same night I happened upon the car- because in scenarios of monotony such as these one tends to mix up the precise order of events- I encountered a cornfield where the corn was just beginning to show itself. It must have been May or June, and I stood near these small sprouts and wondered if they would be edible yet. Not nearly at full maturity. Regardless I cracked one off the stalk and devoured it raw, discarding the peels in my pocket like a candy wrapper.

There is something disconcerting about the texture of unripe corn.

Way out I could spot a watering rig, one of those behemoths which litter American agriculture, which can quench the thirst of crops an acre wide, and with the little strength I had remaining that day I made for it. It was far more sizable and imposing in person than it may appear while driving past it. It easily cleared my head, by at least six feet.

I turned on the faucet and the apparatus began showing itself, one by one the small punctures on the underside roared with fury, pelting the corn below with hogsheads of nourishment. I stood in the artificial downpour for so long, feeling the sensation of thoroughly drenched clothing, letting each drip trickle off the strands of my hair to my shoes, which after some time became lodged in the mud. It had been so long, too long, to neglect my hydration. I gulped it in, took it in as if it were air, gorged myself on the stuff. After some time, I collapsed from mere exhaustion in the midst of the torrent and rolled onto my back, observing how the stars blended with the miniscule droplets of water to create an intricate animated pattern of glittering cosmic irrelevance. After that it went silent and I lost myself in the neverending spout.

I had been making my way in a somewhat Eastern direction for what seemed like multiple weeks, and still saw no trace of human habitation, no remnants of man's presence save the structures one would expect. I had phased into a scenario where people simply did not exist. Not out here, at any rate. This was an ancient American backcountry, one untouched by progress or mind. I felt that this was how the continent had been in prehistoric times, a placid flat of wildebeest and crawling things. Of mud stacks and dry bone.

is crushing monotony weighed upon me, I was also phasing
times during sleep, I would catch out of the corner of my eye
air of headlights or taillights somewhere on the reaches of that
plateau, yet they would just as soon vanish over a distant hill,
or distinguish themselves in a heartbeat. Always within my vicinity, yet
separated from me by time and space. Such seemed to be the modus operandi
of these nocturnal sirens.

Once I spotted a buffalo carcass in the midst of a whole herd of bison.
The thing's peers were chewing aimlessly around its beaten hide. There were
close to a hundred of them on a short hill, more of a knoll really, and it
occurred to me then that I had never witnessed a herd of bison in the wild
before- yet here they were, as tremendous as the old Impressionist portraits
would have you believe. A fuzzy swarm of behemoths.

I was hungry then, hungrier than perhaps most people can be without a
complete mental breakdown, and I cautiously tiptoed past the creatures to the
body of the deceased. Its eyes had long since glazed over, and its stomach had
been gouged open to a ludicrous extreme- by what, I couldn't say.

I weighed my options. Bison was, in the time of the Indians, and still very
much is, a choice delicacy, perhaps the only real exotic American meat. I was
reminded of an anecdote which had been related to me by an acquaintance at
high school. She had been out driving late with her friends and they had run
into a deer, she said, and what had been a carefree joyride soon became an
hour-long wait for the sherriff's arrival. Her mirror had been shattered,
by the animal's head, and they just sat back as the life slowly bled from the
deer- it had been a female, she had said.

The sherriff came and told them that the deer would be put out of its
misery by a .22 gauge shot to the brain, that they had no real say in the
matter, and that the doe's flesh would be offered to patrons at a delightful
chalet one county over. With weak knees and stirred stomachs, they bid the
officer a hesitant goodbye and drove from the scene with a scant fraction of
their sanity absent. Scant, yet perhaps vital.

As this imagery rushed back into my head, I realized that the prospect of
consuming the bison was less appealing. Not only had it been slaughtered via
unknown means, but the POSE it held- its four legs splayed to the sides, like
the four directions of the compass- its tongue, thick and scarlet, lolling fro
its sagging jaws. There was no meat immediately visible, only guts and fat
and adipose, and I just sat by it a while as its compatriots chewed and
bellowed, softly, carelessly, at peace with themselves and the solid dirt under
their hooves.

If I would die, I said to myself, so be it. I had been sustaining my lonely
walk with little more than glorified weeds, and I was fatigued, and more than
anything else in the immediate present, I desired rest. So I leaned back again
and felt the dead bison's fur against my skin, a mere fabric without soul.
It was some time later- perhaps hours, though maybe I slept for an entire day-
that I rose.

The herd was gone, and what was more, the carcass had also departed. It
occured to me then that of course I had been phasing yet again. Bison had long
since gone extinct. They were creatures of the past. And yet I saw them. It wa
s becoming more difficult to discern between these other sequences and my
own, it seemed, the further I ventured into the depphs of that deep American
frontier, which few people ever really witness much of.

Perhaps it was the atmosphere which caused these events, perhaps the
weather, or perhaps I had inhaled some deadly carcinogen at ground zero and
was still suffering the aftereffects. Whatever the case, these days were indee
d a ceaseless parade of oddities. The bison being among the least. How I hadn'
realized upon initially seeing them that what I was witness to was impossible,
I cannot say. I blame my stomach.

These illusions were elaborate, deceptive. I think they're what on my toes, really, if it hadn't been for them the boredom of the land may have consumed me within a few days. However, the occasional induced diversion gave me something to look forward to. When you can use your own five senses, life becomes a lot more interesting, lemme tell you.

Sometimes I even thought I spotted the Pres out the corner of my eye. It had been a long time since I had laid eyes on that miserable philanderer, yet the grasslands here were reminiscent of the waving fields which approached his mansion. No, I said to myself. Stave it off. Keep the thought at bay. If you remember it, it'll take place.

Memory is a dangerous thing.

I knew, though, that if I went far enough I would see a village or a gas station or something. Every time I got to the top of a rise I would scan the edges of the visible land. Nothing could be made out. Of course not.

The phasing kept on, to the point where the flats were coated in mist that soaked through my shoes, and spouts of this detrimental fog came reaching down from the skies. Oh, a word here about the weather. Anywhere save the prairie, the land is varied and the sky is usually a clear blue- in the prairie, it is the land which never changes and the skies which retain that sense of variety- a sprawling landscape of cirrus and wispy atmospheric flora are your only real companions for the duration of the journey.

Of course, many of these formations were unreal, or operated on different atomic principles. Jets of rising steam which flew like a fountain of pillows from sentient vents in the midst of a clover patch, clouds so pitch dark they blotted the sun out and you couldn't make your hands out at noontime, clouds that descended softly over you with a horrible whisper and remained until dark. Geometric patterns were made from the clouds, they bent at angles and formed intricate concentric circles. The further I went, the more the skies twisted themselves into insane permutations.

The lake was, perhaps, the greatest phasing event I have ever endured.

It seemed to be the inevitable event my walk had been leading up to, in that it did have an aura of absolute finality about it, it appeared to be the entity from which all things began and end. I walked its shores a week after the cloud phenomena began. It's beyond the crest of a small ridge of flooded prehistoric basalt, and climbing to the top you would see a body of water so expansive and so vast that it cannot be avoided or circumvented.

I knew, when I saw it first, that it was not an ocean. Rather, it was like a landscape from a textbook of deep time- a formation which is geographically impossible. It was deep, so deep that the bottom couldn't be made out, so long that the other side remained obscured past the creeping haze. And all the while the jungle of the sky caromed and danced in a turbulent soiree.

I walked casually in the direction of the lake's stony beach, as if this was perfectly normal, because I had been witness to such sights and wonders by then that this lake seemed a perfectly average midsize American body of water. There were gulls overhead, prehistoric bird things with long tongues and a fiery screech, dipping and zooming to spot small amphibious prey.

Their flight was calculated, I noticed, their wings of fantastic aerodynamic stature. Across from where I sat a lowly slug thing wriggled past the waves and onto the beach. It exhaled once before one of these majestic birds of prey executed a flawless head dive and caught the worm in its craw, its blue eyes aglow in gluttonous ecstasy. It took off as quickly as it had descended, joining the fleet in the air as they continued their patrol along the lake's periphery.

There was a piece of driftwood adjacent to what I suppose you could call the lake's West coast. It was gnarled and ancient, covered in spots and patches of damp moss, and it was firmly entrenched in the beach. It served as an adequate seat while I gathered my bearings. The lake appeared, for all intents and purposes, theoretically infinite. My only option was to retreat the way I had come. But I refused. I would walk around it, I told myself. Scour its recesses and observe it while my wits were about me.

Above the prehistoric things circled. I doubted they could effectively maul me, though they did appear hungry and did appear to function en masse. A squadron of ugly predators with mean glints on their avian visages. I shook my fist at them aggressively, as if to taunt them. The next worm thing that protruded from the lapping boundary would be mine and mine alone, to kill and to jam down my disgusted throat. Two can play at this game.

I got to my knees and cupped some of the lake's endless water. It had a taste like day-old seltzer, disgusting and lukewarm though not polluted. But it was teeming with bacteria, I thought. With LIFE. With unknown organisms that could mutate and fester and puncture a vital organ or two. I spit the stuff out. The lake was, indeed, a point of conception for living things. Like an aqueous womb, it birthed the bird-things, the worm-things, who knew how many other species it was capable of producing in its Atlantean furnace. Millions. A nonstop Cambrian explosion.

How many subterranean aquifers in the Midwest had once appeared as this lake now did, reeds and ferns swishing in the sunlit zone, behemoths and ichthyosaurs inhabiting the unseen depths? How little did we know?

It was awful, to consider how little we really understand what went on here. How little I knew, how little even my superiors in the field knew. America is still, in many ways, a new world. A fresh perspective, a solution to an equation we once only possessed half the information to. America is as ancient and savage as the fertile crescent, as brutal and varied as the Siberian tundra. We live in a microcosm.

The lake was a sort of microcosm, I saw as I trod by the sand and the tidal pools, with its own microcosmic inhabitants. Worlds of fish and of crustaceans living unseen lives, procreating and consuming and teeming. Seething, like boiling water. As I pressed on the waves became higher, first three feet and then ten, diminishing only when they flung themselves onto the pebbles of the shoreline. The lake, it seemed, behaved in different ways in different areas. Its diversity staggered the mind.

It seemed the bird things had ceased their relentless pursuit for the night and I myself felt my legs growing weary. Above, the frenetic atmosphere raged, sending long jagged lightning bolts into that electric soup, spurring still further biodiversity in all likelihood. The storm darkened and it pushed forth a blanket of thick, fat drops. I walked about 30 paces from the shoreline and attempted to sleep despite the raging downpour. There was no alternative to collapsing here in the open- the land was aggressive and devoid of shelter and the only real alternative to remaining on that narrow strip of sand would have been to effortlessly fling myself into the whirling froth without a lick of hesitation, to sacrifice myself to the damp chasm and sink eternally into the freshwater abyss.

MY dreams that first night were of many things- Hypatia's face, Hank and his account of Foley, Berkowitz's malformed face, grinning with sadistic pleasure as he infused toothpaste with cyanide. And then these ceased and I was left with the noise of the rushing water and the unseen currents. My head had seen too much clutter, too much useless junk. I had to focus. Had to utilize my intuition. Discern the truth, ascertain the facts.

The morning came, and with it I found myself sputtering and gasping for breath- the lake had risen and taken me with it, though it was calmer than it had been during the night. I mustered a weak backfloat, my whole being turned upwards to that cosmic lunacy, and began paddling forward as if to ascertain my position in relation to where I had been, which was impossible, or to spot a recognizable landmark, which was equally impossible.

I did make out a piece of driftwood, which was smaller than the one I had sat on but seemed to be from the same sort of tree and I made my way toward it assuming it would serve as a sort of flotation device. I clutched it with my fingers- which were now bleeding, inexplicably- and held onto it for dear life as the cosmic stew above me began its noontime exercise.

The sun, still invisible behind this gargantuan formation, lit upon a monstrous swirl of unfathomable size- larger than even the hurricanes of the Southeast, it remained aloft, neither a threat to me or to the driftwood. Gradually, I neared the area below the eye of the storm.

From the eye emanated a beam of pure yellow light, what I can only assume was a sort of refracted sunlight, but which took on a sort of spiritual essence and stature on account of its position. It was as if the waves were shuttling me toward the beam, and I felt the rays of the sun on my face and looked up into the light and I nearly let go of the branch.

JUST LET GO OF IT, said the eye. IT'S OK. IF YOU WANT THE TRUTH AND I KNOW YOU DO- ALL YOU NEED DO IS RELEASE YOUR GRIP. DO YOU WANT THE TRUTH, OR NOT?

The eye screamed

It was clever, I'll give it credit where it's due. As manipulative as some people. And maybe it was telling the truth, for all I know it offered me the absolute truth. Maybe if I had sunk to the bottom I would have found all of life's solutions. But life's solutions aren't worth much when you're dead, and life is nothing without questions. I pushed away from the eye and out toward the perimeter of the skyward whirlpool.

COME BACK, it said. IF YOU DON'T NOW, YOU WILL SOMETIME.

As the voice of the eye faded into the distance and was gradually usurped by the din of the water, I spied a flock of bird-things approaching. These ones were even meaner than the ones on the shore- undoubtedly hardened by an exclusively lake-bound existence. They had a wingspan of around ten feet and though my eyes were filled with grime and my arms were tired enough to detach, I resolved in the moment that if the bird-things wanted me, I wouldn't be going without a fight.

As the group neared me the leader made a blistering, ominous screech which echoed across the surface of the water, and his friends all responded in kind. The leader was missing an eye, his feathers were ruffled, and there were multiple bare spots in his sickly plumage.

Without hesitation, I flung myself back and attempted to paddle with both arms, and simultaneously lifted the driftwood above my head, for use as a weapon. It was heavy, albeit full of holes and lighter than most wood. The bird-thing saw that I was aiming the sharp end at him and as he and his troupe began their dive, I could swear they let out a grotesque laugh at my inconvenience and my predicament. To them I was little more than an ant to be picked from an infinite plain of H₂O.

There are few things stranger than the realization that birds are capable of laughter. Despite all I had seen during my trek, that laughter managed to legitimately catch me off guard. They swooped down in multitude, there were five, including the leader, and they were larger brutes than most tough-guy motorcyclists would be willing to take on.

The leader attempted to submerge me with his talons, while the stooges pecked viciously at my jacket, which by now was soaked through, little more than an inconsequential rag. With every blow they gouged a fresh wound, and it seemed the scent of blood in the water only encouraged them and spurred them on to go faster. I swung at the air with my stick.

The chips were down, I surmised. This was how it would end, me out in the center of an unknown American body of water, killed by archaeopteri. I could identify with them. They were the only things I had seen with anything close to real emotion or willpower. My profession meant I was an honorary vulture, didn't it? Maybe they deserved my limp musculature. Maybe they were entitled to a feast of my flesh. Anything was possible.

I lunged at one of their legs- I suppose it was down to the bird-thing's hollow bones, or perhaps it was simply that it was malnourished- but it let out an ear-piercing roar as the leg snapped in half and the claw went limp. The others increased the frequency of their attacks as the injured one limped upward into the clouds, visibly shaken.

With one smooth swoop of the wing, the leader knocked the piece of driftwood from my shivering arms. I was now entirely defenseless, unless I could outwit them on a purely physical level. They rose and fell, rose and fell, an aerial maneuver more stunning than any performed by Yeager or a comparable jet pilot. Like many aspects of this savage region, it was dangerously beautiful.

The three remaining underlings went for my neck, my sternum, and my head respectively, while the leader remained about 20 feet above and chirped out or rather called out orders to those below. I grasped at their extremities, tried prying one of their beaks open until it broke like a cooked lobster, but their beaks were remarkably resilient. As they shrieked their long tongues lashed out like vipers, slashing deep cuts in my forehead.

By now it was pure atrophy, my blood was trickling down my arms and mixing with the waves, my life juice was being sucked out methodically by these merciless killers, and as they surrounded me in a blizzard of damp, odious avian textures, I identified more and more with the plight and struggle of the worm-things back on the shore.

The food web in this environment, it seemed, was a sort of cruel tragedy, in that the worm-things continued to pursue progress despite instantly losing to the ceaseless onslaught of the bird-things, whose existence was equally miserable despite their position at the top of the food chain. They were always aspiring for more, despite more being logistically unattainable. It was a cutthroat exchange.

As things went hazy from the lack of blood and a sort of complacent darkness overcame my field of vision, it occurred to me that given the width and breadth of the lake, these bird-things could not be the superior species. Certainly, they were apex predators, but it was improbable that the lake had not in the millions of years it remained here undisturbed borne an even greater killer- one who could only evolve down in the unfathomable reaches of that watery grave. My blood seeped and sunk through the layers- calling the beast, coaxing it, a signal of fresh meat- it stirred from its long hibernation, and a shudder rippled across the area. The birds felt it.

They cawed at the leader, who slowly glided down to investigate the motion. I saw this with my face halfway submerged, they had for the most part left me for dead. I remained perfectly still, however my submerged eye caught a look at the back of this greater predator- and the leader, too, with his working eye, attempted to ascertain the nature of the formless shape that crept silently beneath us, fifty feet long and rising- a shape like that of an ancient half-truth, regarded by the bird-things as a local myth.

The fish first appeared only as a dismal row of grey teeth, but it gained surprising momentum and leapt headlong from the surf, directly at the leader. He squaked only once before the ichthyosaur-thing clamped onto his lower half. The leader's hubris served as a lesson to the others, who all made a beeline to get out of the beast's reach.

It was spotted, its surface slick, and it was much like a crocodile, with a snout and a long patterned tail, albeit perhaps larger than even a great whale. This thing had spent its days in the remains of an ancient city, hoarding the treasure, or a reverberant dark pool where its lullaby was the rush of the subsurface eddies as they wound their way through its strange and altogether alien home.

I saw the leader whack its wings desperately in vain, trying to liftoff from the creature's jaws while its vital organs became little more than a moist jelly in the beast's throat. Its eyes, though largely featureless, sparkled, and the remainder of the flock was by now far removed, having abandoned their companion to his grisly fate. The leader fell limp and the ichthyosaur-thing opened its mouth once more to drop the bird's carcass, effortlessly, into its waiting stomach. There was a low reverberant humming noise, almost imperceptible, from the beast's lips, a wretched expression of complete satisfaction.

It turned toward me.

I had ~~been~~ very lucky, almost too lucky, and despite all the blood loss I retained consciousness- enough to witness the death of what moments prior I had reckoned was the worst threat. The water was cold, though not to the point of being insufferable, and somehow cold water tends to sharpen one's awareness. I was groggy, yet against all odds I was lucid.

It made a motion at me and at first I really thought it was going to move forward and do the same it had to the bird- but then it only shrugged what one could term its shoulders and returned once more to that crypt of buried knowledge, its form seeming to evaporate the further it went down.

As for me, the ordeal had left me taxed. As day gave way to night- because it seemed the lake had the traditional cycle of 24 hours, despite the eerie lack of visible celestial bodies- I resumed my backfloat. This was freshwater, and floating upon it took a substantial effort, a conscious effort I could not exude were I to fall asleep.

I recall some postcards from somewhere in the Mediterranean, with salt basins where summer tourists swam, and they were so infused with salt that sinking in them was impossible- one's only choice was to wade through the sodium-infused sea and breathe the briny air and take in the sweeping marble columns. Just my luck to be in water of the exact opposite formula and consistency, with no golden turrets to speak of.

The abnormal cloud formations were mesmerizing, a constant stream of passive entertainment. In certain areas, rivers of fire illuminated the cotton white underbellies of the formations- in other areas, the vapor wove around itself in long thin wisps. One patch of vapor was particularly agitated, moving frenetically, while still another area appeared to be forming some fundamental characters akin to cuneiform.

As the lake darkened and the activity of the lake and the clouds above it reduced in frequency and complexity, I wondered what had happened to my old residency in Niwot. What had happened to my things, my implements, my pencil set and recorder. Probably liquidated in some kind of estate sale. Such matters were inconsequential by now. I had sailed far past the need for those material contrivances, I reflected. I was more attuned to the world and its ways than 99% of the men and women who form our country's workforce. What more could there be to life than this, drifting forever into oblivion, the shore a distant memory and the ground a forgotten illusion?

The lake grew familiar to me. I drank its disgusting water, which though devoid of salt tasted in certain areas of languid mineral deposits. I learned through trial and error which colors to avoid, which consistencies were safe for consumption, how best to gather the stuff in my hands. Were it not for that primordial miasma, my odds of survival would have been slim, however it was consumable to a certain extent.

Food was another matter altogether. I avoided fish as they tended to avoid me, and I worried that some could be young ichthyosaurs whose parents would respond with fervor if I were to take one of their own. Given the size of the thing which had killed the bird, I chose to avoid any darting guppies. I paid for this decision with malnutrition.

After a time- I believe it was around my third day on the excursion- I floated near a dense cluster of vegetation. The things were a foot wide and a sickly purple hue, and they floated easily like lily-pads and their stems careened into the pitch dark invisible nether regions at precise angles.

They were more akin to oysters than to lily-pads, though, and as with every other aspect of the lake, they were sentient, with a consciousness and a will. They snapped their mouths open and shut, darted at passing insects, and moved entirely of their own volition, bound only by that umbilical cord which was moored in the mud somewhere far beneath.

They seemed to be a kind of transitional species, on the boundary between plant and animal, uncategorizable given the five-kingdom model of biology as we perceive it. Their surfaces were slick with a sort of glazed secretion, and their mouths had a hole in the back. They had no other real features, save a kind of flower on top of some of them. No eyes, ears, or limbs. Just a gaping maw and a stalk.

I felt one of them, and it made a deep rumbling noise, so I pulled my fingers back and considered my options. I had to eat. I had seen myself in the water, and I had lost at least 10 pounds and my eyes were sagging. I was skeletal, and as the things moaned and rasped I could sense my internal organs failing. There was no question. I would need to do a couple of these lily things in.

I remember little about the process of consumption, save that the meat of the creature was sequestered somewhere within its upper recesses, that it tasted like cheap wine and that after cramming pounds of the stuff down my impatient gullet, I promptly vomited it out. I can only hope some of it worked its way into my system so as to benefit me in some way.

My standards were really dropping out here, eh?

That's what the wilderness does to a person- it'll reduce them to a purified and distilled version of themselves, one with time to self-reflect and pause, to consider your choices and the decisions which led you to any certain area. A confrontation with nature is, I would argue, beneficial in reminding us of our place in the grand scheme of things.

The lake grew less turbulent, and I managed to catch other floating detritus in the mix- some rope, a weather balloon which had long since been abandoned by whatever agency had launched it. From this assorted garbage I fashioned a modest raft, upon which I sat and slept for what felt like weeks. The waves gradually flattened until all was calm and serene.

By night the skies were almost clear. The moon rose and fell, and though it was sometimes obscured by the tempest, at times I could swear I saw a sparkling artifice on the rim of the Sea of Tranquility- a Sea, perhaps, parallel to my own. Hope, and the promise of a return to my own world.

A world which had undoubtedly changed since I had left it, but mine regardless, A world of complacent familiarity.

The more curious among you may ask me how in the Hell I survived out in a limbo like that. I suppose the answer is the human exploratory drive, which encourages the discovery of that which is not immediately visible. In time I came to know all the flora and fauna of the lake. I happened upon more patches of the clam-things, spotted massive shadows darting beneath me, devouring smaller ones. Often there were coral reefs of indescribable rainbow beauty.

I knew, also, that the Lake did not exist in my world. Sometimes, while falling asleep on the raft, the lake would vanish entirely and I would be sprawled upon a meadow hill with a gentle slope. Of course, as soon as I could make out the faraway telephone poles and the distant light of a rural country store, I would phase back onto the lake and the lapping waters that gave way to nothing save more lapping waters.

The lake was, of course, spatially and geographically impossible. My mind sometimes wandered, while drifting, as to how the formation had come about in this timeline, and why the beings here were of such a primordial intensity. I hadn't phased back. That had never yet happened and I had no reason to believe it had.

The asteroid missed. Yes, that would make enough sense. Asteroid misses, dinosaurs evolve into birds, mammals remain a small and rodentlike group who cower beneath rocks. Ichthyosaurs evolve into other ichthyosaurs, modern ones, and through some freak happenstance America contains a massive inland sea. This was my hypothesis throughout most of my journey.

The bison had been much the same.

The bird-things no longer threatened me, I had stockpiled an arsenal of sticks and other implements and they maintained a safe distance, circling a few hundred feet above. If I were to die, they would descend and pick my bones clean, though for the time being I felt no fatigue. More ferns plucked from the sand deposits for nourishment.

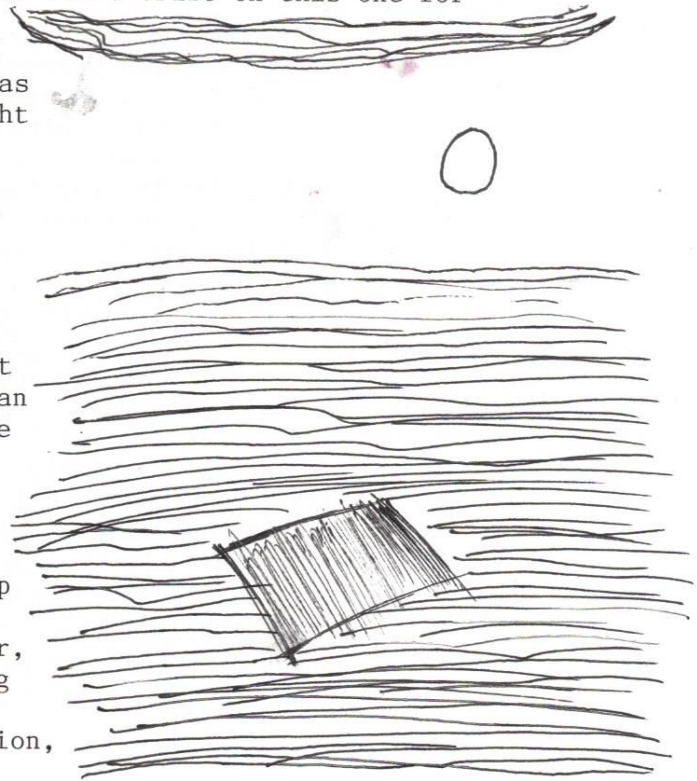
The water remained fresh throughout. Could only be an inland sea, really. more imposing than any of the Great Lakes, you could drift on this one for decades without spotting land.

I wondered, in a sense, why it was that I remained alive given how different my diet was from everything that lived here, how downright otherworldly the dust particulate in the atmosphere felt. Surely some savage amoeba could penetrate my hapless immune system and wreak havoc on my organs. Yet, nothing came.

Some nights up late, staring at the temporally impossible lunar settlements, I considered another sort of exploration. The type which would involve jumping off the raft and plunging headfirst into those Antediluvian depths, which mesmerized and peaked my desire for novelty.

Then of course I would reconsider, given the diversity of the things down there and their weightless mass. Add to that the lack of buoyancy afforded by salt, and swimming up could be a nigh impossible task.

I washed, drank, and cooked with the water, it had sustained billions of years of teeming life and being as such I demanded that it sustain mine. I beat the liquid into submission, with a willpower I didn't know I possessed.



In these later days I would, again, catch a glimpse of a flock of birds circling the waters from a medium distance, although they didn't approach me or even as much as attempt a dive. Word of the incident had traveled fast, I supposed. They kept to their own business and I to mine, and as such we developed a kind of placid mutual respect for one another.

I avoided the lily-clam things as much as possible save when it came to dire measures, and in such circumstances I tipped my head back to avoid sudden regurgitation. They became more plentiful here at the far reaches of the lake, patches and colonies of the sickly grey creatures floating, suspended like microbes in a vast agar dish.

By night they lapped and breathed softly through their singular orifice, and with my raft in the midst of a colony of thousands, they sounded like a great wind, producing considerable disturbances to the surface. The behavior of the species was utterly alien, with no readily accessible parallel.

How I kept my mind through the process, I'm not sure. I must have slipped a little from the man I had been into something else. One need not be capable of phasing to have life experiences transform their body and mind, one need only be receptive and responsive to the chaos the world offers, give themselves willingly up to it. I felt I was purified like iron from a forge, the expansive being not only my forge but of the world long ago as it had been.

My sleep at this point was fitful and without dream, I tossed and turned on deck, my head was racing, preoccupied with thoughts of the ichthyosaurs which doubtless circled miles below. Really, it's a wonder I got to sleep at all. As with the food and drink, I accepted what I was afforded.

Though I knew on a higher level that it was false, I told myself that I had been through worse and made it through, and that quitting now would prevent me from seeing the ultimate—the distant coast of the lake, which I had been envisioning, or catching brief mirages of, for around 2 weeks. It is possible that the lily things were telepathic and that they influenced my state of mind, indirectly. I did feel more at ease around them, despite their putrid odor, as they were prey of such an undesirable caliber that they staved off most predators. I felt a pang of guilt at eating the few I had.

It hadn't really helped me any. I was losing weight by the hour. My reflection was dark in the ripples that echoed over the sandy banks, it mocked my will. Dark bags underneath the eyes. May as well jump in now, old chum, he said. The fish need fish food. I sat and waited for the ebb and tide of the lake to carry me to my inevitable destination, whatever it may have been. Indifference, maybe that was the key here. Couldn't become invested.

Discretion, as they say, was the better part of valor, particularly when reminded of your own relative insignificance on an exponential scale— not even a universal one by necessity, merely a terrestrial one was enough to be stripped of my own self-importance, the lake initiated a brutal ego-death and I held on as best I could. The psychological effect of the environment was greater than the physical, the sense of isolation at the mercy of the uncaring living stew was as much an obstacle as any danger warned of by the sailors of old. Yet, they had warned about similar things too, hadn't they? Not all whirlpools. The deepest whirlpool was the one you could imagine.

The eddies gradually petered out and I was once again caught on a vast featureless plateau of water, this one seemingly immune to tidal effects. One by one, I lost sight of the lily-things as I ventured onward East, and though I had no real point of reference for my progress I retained blind faith in the will of the lake as a sentient and cognizant entity. I imbued it with pseudo-diefication, for it was all I knew, and it occurred to me then that perhaps there was no far shore, perhaps it truly was infinite. Yet the water remained fresh, with no sign of Atlantic mixing. I was on Earth.

Another Earth, certainly, but Earth regardless.

In the center of the featureless plain, one lone ichthy made the rounds, it was at least a mile in length, such a massive being it nearly exceeded my perception. It caused short swells with the undulations of its fins and tail, its teeth shook and it stared up toward me with its cold eye, which was submerged around 700 feet away.

As it rose and I caught a better view off its right flank, I saw that the thing was truly ancient, coated in algae and moss, with ruptures in its flesh every now and again, battle scars which would never heal. It was thousands of years in age, millennia spent in the zero-gravity world below, it made its peers guppies and sardines by contrast. It was of such proportions that it cared as much for me as we care for an aphid.

The tone it created with its mouth was at once serene and hypnotic, from the rows of jagged teeth came the sort of music without compare, a deep grunt akin to bagpipes on the Scottish moor, a recognition of the beast's predicament. It was tired, it told me, exhausted through eons, for all it knew it was invulnerable and immortal, had emerged in the precambrian from a microscopic egg brooded by an unknown mother, had through the survival of the fittest achieved utter satisfaction as the top of the food chain, lived for centuries without challenge or opposition or novelty, which was an untold misery.

As it rose further I spotted its full beak protruding from the crashing waves which writhed to greet its presence, and my raft was nearly capsized. Its moan continued, its yawning mouth twisted from a long period of grotesque supremacy.

Kill me, it said. I am already dead by technicality, I have long been dead in spirit, what you see now is a mere remnant of the great shadow which once struck terror into the hearts of the bird-things (curse their scrawny feathered hides!) Spoke council over the range of all matters in the court of Beneath, an advisor to high majestrate Plesio, may he rest in the echoing recesses of the impenetrable, yea.

So slaughter me, gadfly. Feast on my flesh, that it may sustain you after your long fast, and may you survive, though not as I have. I ask nothing of you in return, save except that if you refuse my generosity I will smite ye and dash the craft into pieces, and you'll know the wrath of the mighty. So take your shot now, fore I change my mind.

It rolled onto its backside and I saw its stomach, which was like an aircraft carrier of soft pale flesh. In the center I spotted an orifice several hundred feet in diameter, it writhed in pain and a viscous violet fluid emanated from it. I reckoned this was the source of the beast's pain. I paddled with my comatose hands toward the maw, and it felt as though the trip there took at least half an hour.

Don't wait, gadfly, it said. You're my last resort, and I count on you. If you hesitate, if you strike with anything save utmost confidence, my behemoth soul will not be laid to rest. I am an emperor, child, and warrant dignity. Kill me, now, and feast upon me.

I pried one of the planks of the raft free from its ties and broke it against the hull such that it became an unwieldy sword. I wondered if it was capable of smiting the beast, yet as soon as the thought entered my mind I dismissed it. I could not hesitate. I raised the plank. Before I could lower it into the outer rim of the orifice, however, a great bird-thing, larger than any I had as yet seen, dove toward the behemoth with an ear-piercing shriek from behind a veil of mist.

I am death, it screeched. I am the fury from on high, in the aeshar I wait patiently, and now by the honor of my forefathers, I smite ye. I curse the beings of the deep, for I am a higher being of higher calling. I am the thing of tomorrow, and I need not mind the folly of your prattling. I mock your existence.

NOW_ DIE!

With one smooth motion akin to that of a hot knife through butter, the bird careened headlong into the gaping maw, and for scant bizarre moments all I heard was the distant lapping of the waters. I set the spear down, at last too exhausted to lift an object.

The rumble was faint at first, although little by little the water directly over the wound bubbled with blood and viscera, large pustules of black and violet ooze careened from the pore, thrashing yellow tubules that resembled vipers and seething macroorganisms with spikes. Whatever this hole had been, it had been thoroughly diseased.

I vomited then, though what I vomited I don't know, given that my stomach was empty. I emptied my organs, a thick stream of bile and gallbladder fluid careening into the mass, adding to its disgusting intensity.

And like that, the sides of the beast began splitting open, and I tried limply paddling away from the scene, however this was in vain as the fish's breadth was of incomprehensible proportions. I was caught on a live grenade. It gave forth, the heart rising from the fathoms like an untethered weather balloon, the gills detaching and flying out of the beast's body, airborne missiles with points of death on the tip.

The tidal wave accumulated, an unbelievable tsunami hundreds of feet high. In it were masses of the flesh, boulder-sized chunks of slimy meat amid the all-consuming fray. My pale knuckles gripped the edge of the raft and held on for dear life as the death knell of the ancient being sped my small craft forward at such a velocity that I imagine I broke the sound barrier.

Twenty thousand gallons of H2O splashed down in a torrent of fluid terror, a blue grave. I spread myself along the raft's surface to distribute my weight evenly, and once or twice as it made its way down the slope of the wave it flipped and I was hurled into midair, skydiving amid the deafening roar and swish.

I could see little, though far out in the distance I saw that the entire surface of the lake had become a wobbling mess, far from the flat desert it had been. Whirlpools and other dangerous phenomena formed, and the basin was disrupted to the extent that in certain spots the water towered in majestic spikes and you could make out the floor of the lake, a hundred miles deep, a long-forgotten dead place of mud and basalt.

The placidity had been stripped from the formation, and its raw energy was at last revealed- a fountain of life and of existence, where endless cycles and secret wars were waged between its inhabitants, and savagery won over civility. This was the end of the lake as I had known it, as the creatures here had known it for millennia. It was now a wild and unpredictable kettle, a dreamscape of abject lunacy.

My raft was dashed upon a protruding rock formation several meters in height and I didn't notice or care when my limp body sank into the ~~blue~~ blue depths. I no longer worried about breathing, or eating, or moving. I let the water carry me aloft wherever it would. The last thing I saw before I slept was the bulbous eye of yet another fish- perhaps an estranged descendant of the great one.

In the neverending duration before death, I could faintly make out the voice of the president, walking through a blue door, dressed in that tasteless garb of his. He extended his hand and I touched it, old leather, wrinkled ivory. He said.

You haven't forgotten your mission.

What is my mission? I asked.

That's for me to know and you to find out.

Piss off, I told him.

He shrugged and walked back through the opening, and it closed

When I came to I could see, about three miles out, the extant shore. I was adrift once again, as adrift as I had been that night interminable months ago, which felt ages distant. Looking behind me I could see that what remained of the lake had been obscured by a thin veil of orange mist. It was sunset.

As the shore neared and I paddled with my last ounces of strength I saw that on the far Eastern boundary of the lake there was a strange crescent, a jagged mountain range even larger than the Rockies, bare and pocked like the surface of an alien planet, with shadows on the rim and on each featureless curve.

These were the Hammurat, a malformed variety of the Appalachian, though further West and with more of that bizarre American tinge, an echo of an alternate America where beasts ruled supreme over all vermin. A savage land with savage geography to match.

The shore was soft, and the waves which bore upon it were refreshing. The sands on the beach murmured, ever so faintly, and I fancied they were warning me from venturing too far into the labyrinthine granite crevasses of the Hammurat, and I reassured them as I sat upon a small mound of dirt that I had no plans on doing so.

The orange mist dissolved around the perimeter of what was visible, and night set in. It was cold, the wind shooting out from the lake reflected off those chalky crags, creating a sort of insulated chill. I gathered my bearings and brushed my hair from my eyes. No salt, at least.

I could hear, faintly, the roar and crackle of the lake's present state. Venturing out upon it now would be impossible, as it had been split between impossible turrets of lava and chasms of barnacle-ridden hurricanes. It was a no-man's-land, utterly devoid of empathy, and if I strained my neck in a very specific position, I thought I could discern the low bassoon wails of the last ichthy and the frenzied squawk of the bird-things. But I saw nothing out amid those abstract and unlit forms. Night blanketed all.

And then the moon came out, large and proud above the turmoil, the lunar colonies sparkling against all odds upon the rim of the tranquil sea. The craters and indentations up there were exactly like the Hammurat, it dawned on me then. Airless, without vegetation, a blank slate of rock. How this primordial world reflected in equal measure the state of the cosmos.

By the light of the moon I could make out around 50 feet ahead, the gentle ripples of the near-lake before the onslaught of the chaotic tumult. Why the shore was unaffected is something I'll never really understand. The tide swept in and out, the little pools on the bank with their own tiny ecosystems, where microbial flora flourished.

There came a slight -plunk- about ten feet before me, and I caught sight of a very tiny aquatic creature, slowly walking on four undeveloped legs, leaving flipper prints as it went, slowly picking its way through the particulate. An understated being, it was in many ways archetypal- that is to say, it was a harbinger of the future.

I got up from my perch and came over to greet the thing while it waddled, its hide was coated in some kind of embryonic sheath and its eyes were glossy. It was frail and weak and undoubtedly shaken up from the turbulence of the evening, a rejected immigrant. In the oxygen atmosphere, its lungs quivered and retracted, it took a deep gasp of that cool nocturnal ambiance.

"Hello," I said. It was strange to hear my voice. "How are you tonight?" It made a slight croaking noise with its throat, as if to say that it would be alright. Like me, it could roll with the punches and take the heat. It could withstand misfortune, it could endure hardship.

In the course of around ten minutes, the lungfish had made its way to the border of the Hammurat, and as the sand of the beach ended, it made a small chirp of joy. In those wretched wastelands, it would not eat and it would have no shelter from the fearsome predators who guarded them with tooth and claw. It would be a splendid adventure for a being without apprehension.

I, for one, was petered out on adventure. I shoved my hands into what remained of my jacket pockets and strode casually along the beach. It would be a day's trek at least before I came upon any edible vegetation. In the meantime I was left alone with my own thoughts, to contemplate the events I had witnessed. The shore wove off to the West and I was left standing on a plate of rapidly cooling mud.

The sun rose from the East then, and as it did the range phased in and out with increasing rapidity. The contrast between the soft tones of dawn and the blunt streak of midday were apparent, a strobe across the land, a hypnotic pattern while the great formidable second continental divide vanished into thin air and grass sprouted in an instant.

And just like that, I was back amid the sweeping vistas of the plains as I remembered them, grass for miles and no sign of the lake or the range. I felt unsettled after so much time in the world of the subconscious. Withdrawal, that was the feeling. Withdrawal from the harmony of the abstract like the absence of a syringe.

Mission. Pres had mentioned something about a higher purpose.

Had to have been a joke, of course. There is no higher purpose in life, no sum to the equation. If there were I wouldn't have been flung across time and space every which way. I was subject to chaos even now, while my bones begged for rest and my bloodstream ached for water. Chaos was as defined and apparent as the lake had been. Entropy, synonymously.

In my mind I envisioned the lungfish, slowly moping along a desolate canyon wall with determination and resilience in those slimy little eyeballs. It could hear the distant howl of the fang-bear and the grotto of the seven headed serpent, yet it put one flipper in front of the other regardless, if it went out it would go out in style.

And if it didn't- well-

The notion was deliciously electric. My worries assuaged, I continued along some nameless Midwestern turnpike and off into lands unknown.

