

statue higher function mechanical ghost sound of car
old sailing equipment page of herodotus' bad time open sky
herodotus' dog dad beep skull hours of twilight old wooden board
pang of temptation deer velvet living room
cluster of flowers sterile hospital smell beep beep beep
many success hand time long time
present electric buzz wrist big secret black splinter
low poplar branch track of things
static of summer version of dad
deep grove ribbon of flesh passing of time naked beech tree
like smoothness eared page eye ancient greek stuff
story of onesilus? light breeze play sip of coffee
vague human shape antler little bit great black tree lack of food
nature abhors crowd of people

Honey From A Skull

Jack Hook

Dad shakes his head and takes a sip of coffee. The cafe is empty around us. I haven't seen him for some time, not since he'd picked me up from the airport with my tail between my legs. I'd tried to make my time in Denmark work, make it permanent, but it had fallen apart. He says something to me about youth and then starts to ramble, that ancient Greek stuff that always makes my eyes glaze over, numbers that end in BC and names that end in 'us.' I've let him down and I know it.

It's three years later. I am here and only here. My breath shakes as it leaves me. The old wooden boards of the jetty creak with the breeze and the river runs under my feet. Reality doesn't grip so tightly here. It's only a mile from the city but it may as well be a hundred. The sounds of cars and the ever-present electric buzz don't make it out here. An escape. That's what Denmark has been to me for a long time now.. The button I press when the pressure builds to the point of breaking down the machine.

I haven't seen a single person for what feels like hours; not since I walked past the old bridge where the spiders nest and their cobwebs light up like crystal at twilight. Except for the statues, that is. Black wood carved into vague human shapes, looming over the dirt path. They have solid, sharp heads and shoulders, curves that could be spines or stomachs, hints of what may be faces. I've asked around a few times in the city, wondered who made them and why they put them there. The locals seem amused by the young foreigner asking about statues in what could be generously described as broken Danish. For the origins, I get shrugs. For their name, I get *Følgerne*. The Followers.

There's a fallen branch laying across the path, pale in death. Stepping over it feels wrong but I do it anyway. The air is thick here, earthy. Autumn hasn't touched this sprawling forest yet, everything is still imbued with the humming green static of summer.

It effects the brain, numbs those higher functions. Helps me ignore the pain growing in my muscles and between my joints. Makes it easier to forget about the numbers. That's what been keeping me up at night, what made me book a plane ticket and come back here; statistics. Life boils down to statistics. Percentage gained vs percentage lost. Everything else is only as permanent as memory and I never did have much of that. The bad times are like oil in water, rising to the top and tainting everything underneath.

There's a hollow ache running through me. I can't tell if it's lack of food, anxiety tumescing in my stomach, or pangs of temptation. It would be so easy to lie down in the soil and fade into the static. Pull the plug. Someone could find me in the winter among the twisted, naked beech trees, branches blackened and leaves sloughed away, frost gilding my eyelashes. They could but they won't. I keep on moving.

The rumbling sound of the river disappeared some time ago, I'm not sure when. It can be hard to keep track of things here, in the hazy few days between summer and autumn. The sun barely sets at night, just dips below the horizon for a few hours of twilight before the day starts again. Time slips through your fingers like soil. My steps fall on grass, stone, water, mud but they keep in time like a cardiac monitor. Beep, beep, beep, beep. Ignore the bones grinding in my legs, the rattle in my lungs. All I have to do is keep the muscles moving, keep those beeps coming, never let them slip into a flatline.

I chant names and dates, whatever I can remember from the dog-eared pages of Herodotus' *Histories*. I'd found a copy in Dad's possessions, nestled between the old sailing equipment and DVD boxsets. On the left, the English translation. On the right, the original Greek. I can hear him now, tripping over his own tongue and bursting into laughter as he tries to recite both.

The wind picks up and something red and brown cuts through the green. It can't be autumn already. I can't be wading through fallen leaves. The red and brown something is

hanging from a low poplar branch and I grab at it, wanting to throw the season away, push the passing of time back for just a little bit longer. It's soft against my fingers, fuzzy like a peach. Deer velvet. The brown skin that grows over deer antlers as they mature, only to fall away in itching, bloody strips in the summer. I move the ribbon of flesh between my hands. One side is still wet, leaving sticky, red tracks along my hands. They're close. Autumn is not. I dive into the green again.

Out here, ideas are as fragile as twigs. You break a handful with every step. They're irreplaceable, can't put them back together again once they've snapped underfoot. I had an idea of a parent, my parent, but it slipped away when I stood in a crowd of people who knew him better than I ever could, and I realised that all I ever saw was the end product. The sum of so many successes and failures that meant nothing once the funeral was over and the memories started to fade. Just like that, the parent was gone and replaced by a person. People die all the time. Old men have falls all the time. The children they leave behind feel like murderers all the time.

The forest gathers in around me, trees creeping closer like they want in on the big secret but I can't catch my breath to tell them. Maybe that's why I'm here. Nature abhors a vacuum and I've felt like nothing else since the day he died and the longest year of my life began. I tried to get clean with soap and bleach when I should've been here with dirt under my nails and deer blood settling in the whorls of my fingerprints. The velvet is wrapped around my wrist and it feels right. It presses against my pulse, still warm, pulling me out of the static, though I don't know where to. Home? I can't remember if home exists any more. Home was a boat that drifted over the horizon, manned by some other captain.

My eyes stay on the ground, so much so that I don't even notice the clearing until I'm already in it and the sun is warming the back of my neck. I see open sky, uninterrupted by the canopy of the forest for the first time in so long. A light breeze plays across the grass.

Then I see what stands at the centre. *Følgerne*. Larger than the ones I left behind at the riverbank, so large that it may have been carved straight from the trunk of a great black tree, but the same brief glimpse of the human form. A sharp edge of a collarbone, a deep groove that could be a brow. At its base is a cluster of flowers, stark whites and pale reds standing out against the black. The statue watches as I cross the clearing and it watches as I falter, breath escaping in a gasp. The flowers are growing from a deer skeleton. Yellowed remains lie in the soil at the foot of the statue, all flesh stripped away, petals bubbling up from between its ribs, its antlers half-sunk into the ground. It looks so fragile. I wonder what killed it. I wonder if it matters. The velvet is cold at my wrist.

I sit at the statue's base, the skeleton at my feet, and stay there for hours; long enough for the sun to sink us all into twilight and the statue's shadow to stretch out across the clearing. Every time I look up, there's a different face looking back as the fading light plays tricks across the statue's head. I dig the antlers out from the dirt and wipe them clean as best as I can. Give the creature some dignity in death at least. Not everyone gets that. I thought about dignity when I sat next to Dad's hospital bed and saw all the bags and machines and wires coiled around him like snakes that I wanted to strangle. When the doctors asked if it was time to let go, I was the only one that could say yes. Then I patted his hand and walked away like a good killer. The bad times float to the top. Always.

I wanted an escape. Still do. I'd tried drinking it down but it had all just spewed back up again, acrid and burning. The only thing option left was to leave. Walk away because walking away is easier. Leave people behind because I can't look people in the eye. Never sleep again because I wake up every morning with the beep beep beep still in my ears like a mechanical ghost. I sit in the grass and cradle the deer's skull. The flowers grow.

With the skull in my hands, bone worn down to glass-like smoothness by time and exposure, I think of Herodotus' dog-eared pages again. 497 BC. A general is executed, his

head hung from the town gates. First it attracts flies. Then it attracts bees. The head is cut down and the townspeople see the honeycomb growing in the general's skull. His murder, an unknowing sacrifice to the god Aristaeus. Life burrowing into death and bursting back out fully-formed. My fingers trace the pale branches of the deer's antlers as the wind starts to grow. Within minutes, its a roar in my ears. I am here and only here. I wanted this. The statue wavers above me, wind picking it apart like maenad claws through flesh. Clouds gather. Black splinters rain down. Flowers turn to vines that wrap around the deer's ribs. I close my eyes.

Emptiness. The ultimate escape. I open my eyes and see nothing. Just like I wanted.
And yet...

I still have a wrist for the deer velvet to cling to and it does. There's still hands and blood encrusted on them.

I still remember every second I spent at Dad's bedside, breathing in the sterile hospital smell and praying for an answer. The memories still burn like bile in my throat.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Nature grows at all costs.

Honey grows in bones, flowers grow on graves, and I can grow from this.

I swear I can.

I swear.

Dad shakes his head and takes a sip of coffee.

'You're young, you're meant to try. Don't be so hard on yourself,' he smiles. 'When I was 20, I was convinced I could build a commune in Shetland. You know how that worked out.'

'You've still got your wall,' I say.

‘That I do, still got my wall,’ his smile grows. I remember the picture hanging in Grandma’s living room, a young, bearded version of Dad leaning on a stone wall in the middle of nowhere that he had built by hand. ‘Do you remember the story of Onesilus?’

I lean back in my seat. ‘How could I forget? Guy loses his head, becomes a beehive. Gripping stuff.’

‘Do you get the relevance?’

I look around the empty cafe, the same place we’d been coming to for breakfasts for at least a decade, and all I can think about is how I failed to not be there.

‘Don’t worry,’ Dad laughs, puts down the coffee, and pats my hand. ‘You will one day.’