VISITATION

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About the Author
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Yet how in these stories there is always someone leaving, someone yearning, someone lying upon the grass, watching dandelions burst into clouds. Behold the birds of the air, my Lord instructs, reminds me. How they descend upon this pointed finger, circle this body, chirrup to the rhythms of the day. And the flowers of the field, how their raiment exceeds even the splendor of kings. See how they brush themselves upon this face, length of limbs, curve of chest, tender torso flecked with dew. This skin, glinting. These hands. But regard them content to subsist, how their story does not need writing. Lie here upon these pastures and know. How the soil trembles with morning, but promises to hold me. How it holds this body still. Allow this body this breeze that comes upon this meadow, these stars of pollen rendering a canvas of the sky, swirling, suspended. Galactic. Watch tranquil this exodus of clouds, this soaring of birds, this bending of grass about this body in stasis. Is it patience or persistence, what this repose still evidences. Capitulation or restlessness. My Lord places his hands over my ears, teaches me be content to subsist. Be content with this. See: In the beginning was the word, he says, but today we needn't hear it. Instead, listen. This story does not need writing. Does not need yearning. Does not yearn for these hands wrested elsewhere but tucked beneath this nape. Pressed soft beneath the warmth of it. There alive beneath its shadow. But today, just these rolling plains. Birds alighting upon the grass. Breeze shaking the memories of leaves. Someone leaving. Daylight, breaking. Dandelions exploding as they were meant to.
CLOUDSWELL

There is a cloud that looks like a squid, and there another one that looks like an apatosaur. Here is one that looks like your grandmother, here is a flower, here is a painting of wild stallions. And over there if you look closely, the first boy you ever thought you loved. What have you seen, and where have you landed, this time. Sitting beside you: your two younger brothers. The bigger one, holding a basketball and spinning it on the tip of his finger. A world. The smaller one, crying. Another world. Suddenly, a hilltop beneath the three of you, and clouds swirling all around. You turn your head, strain your neck. All kinds of shapes. Worlds. The sky under assault. You begin to say something to them, but you cannot. So instead you start pointing out these shapes: squid, apatosaur, grandmother, flower, painting of wild stallions, the first boy you ever thought you loved. The bigger one and the smaller one look at each other and lay down their heads on the grass. In response. They spread out their arms, face the sky. A gust of wind pronounces itself on the moment. The clouds shift, shapes disappear, worlds dissipate, get eaten up.

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In variations of this dream you are holding up a mountain of gold. Your arms spread-eagled, palms skyward, your back is prone, flesh trembling. And with what. A bead of sweat traces the bridge of your nose. The weight of the mountain pressing down upon your shoulders. Your knees buckle, your face crumples in agony. Blood beats upon your temples. Backdrop: swirling reds. Ink curling upward like smoke in this fluid ether. What are you doing, brother, comes a voice that breaks through your exertions. You open your eyes to the formlessness that surrounds you; what opens. You recite to yourself the parts of the flower. You are particular. Stamen, pistil, filament, stigma, petal, sepal, ovary, stem. An anatomy of fragility. What are you doing, the flower is saying. What are you doing to me, what are you doing. The ether thrums. This swirling collapses. Something here falling from the sky, something clinking on the ground. What tilts.

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Now the slope of the shore where you always seem to wash up, large before you, looming. Behind you, those giant waves. The stony path where we always seem to be meeting, where I am always taking you by the hand as if to show you something. Your hand. What I am saying, what I am thinking to say. The waves part, a tunnel cuts through walls of water. The ocean invites entrance, spreads its legs, nods its head, asks us. Shall we make our escape from the land in affliction. Shall we
gallivant into the promise of milk and honey. And there shall you disciple me. Giant squids look out at us on either side, unblinking eyes, shudder in concentration. I am trying to get through to you. I am trying to get through. Here I am pointing to the waters that could come back at each other at any time. Here are my lips, the outline of your ear. Hitherto this urgency. This need. I am grasping your body with tentacle arms, and I am telling you to listen. Listen, please. But the waves are too loud, and they break each other, again, always, and don't they, eventually, inevitably, inviolably, and shall they. Won't they. Somewhere, the sound of a bugle. Somewhere, an echoing. Your body unmoving, unmoved. The walls of water rushing smack into each other, thunderclap, finality. Only the squids with their thousand arms, devouring what remains.

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Then—an open eye. Body in a meadow, dazzle of sun. You think you see people walking about you, shadowy forms fashioned from mute periphery. You think you see trees: branches, leaves, everywhere. You think you see trees walking about you, picking flowers, placing them in their hair, laughing as at a shared secret. All around: the oaks tango, the figs pirouette, but it is only the willows which hazard the waltz. Out of the silence, perhaps a voice, singing: My funny valentine, sweet comic valentine. Lone, beautiful, quivering contralto. Shadow emerging from the forest: neck of a lowing mountain. Whistle of a dinosaur, breath of unfathomable depth. Softness. This unbearable unfurling of everything. On this field: petals brush nape, dew lightly kisses down ends of collarbones. Breeze, weave, this sway of grass. Where have you landed, this time, and what do you see. What resists seeing. What here does the light impale that touches everything, and can you still not move. See, the sky out here has never been quite this blue. Nothing here is ever quite comparable, I'd say. Nothing here otherwise under assault. Under fire. But from afar, this relenting. This crash of waves. From afar, the rush of a hundred wild stallions.
MEANWHILE

Did you think I had a choice. Well, I used to, but now I don’t. See, I’m holding my breath. See. I’m holding my breath. I’m holding my breath, sure, I’m holding it tight, holding it in my chest, keeping it in, keeping it close. No big deal. Now I’m holding it in my hand. See. Do you like it. How it catches the light when I hold it up above my head. The kinds of shadows it makes. The sounds. Now I’m playing with it, tossing it up in the air, rolling it around between my fingers, putting it in my mouth, spitting it out, then bouncing it on the ground. It’s kind of fun. It’s kind of cool to watch. Do you want to play too. Why don’t you take it: Here it is, the eye of the storm.

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Hurry up and get to the part in the story where it starts to rain. Don’t you know this is what you’re supposed to do. Don’t you know this is why you are here. Why I am. This is exactly what the story needs, I say. And there are lots of places to start: How about the window. How about the trees broken. How about the smashed-up cars. The streetlamps, the stop signs, the garbage on the sides of the road. Floating. Expand the horizon of the narrative by discussing our people and their resilience. Storms have become in this country an implicit way to mark the passage of time: Rainy season, dry season, seasons of love. Seasons of learning how to deal with it, maintenance, seasons of reminding ourselves to be prepared the next time. This is what the story tells us. Nineteen of them every year. Six to nine that make landfall.

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I don’t suppose it’s a story of forgiveness. Forgiveness assumes too much.

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But the boy with the raincoat. His hand over his face to keep the rain out of his eyes. The woman with her face framed by water and wind and her hair caked in mud. The other boy at her heel. The mess he’s made with his oversized boots. Umbrella cast aside. Are we there yet. Permutations of every possible response. Are we there yet. Every instance of error. Are we there yet. Unseen wire submerged in streetwater. Interlocked fingers. Lucidity too late. Always too late. The road suddenly too wide. The inevitable crowd. Heads bowed. Distant siren, perhaps coming this way. Perhaps not. No.
Conversation with the lightning: Will you strike me. Will you strike me if I promised I wouldn’t hit back. Will you strike me if I promised that I would. That I would do all I can to make sure it would hurt. To make sure you would remember it. Maybe even enjoy it. Will you promise me you will take it personally. Will you promise you’ll hold nothing back.

How are you, love. It’s been a while since we’ve spoken. Been a while since I’ve seen you, actually, been a while since I’ve meant to. Since I’ve taken the pains to seek you out, to find you, pin you down so I can make sure you won’t get away no matter how hard you try, so that when I place my lips on the softest part of your ears, where it tickles, where it makes you cringe: You will listen to what I have to say. To when I say: Hey there, how are you, and don’t really mean it. To when I say: Tell me, do you still think of me, do you still want to be friends, do you care still—and don’t really mean it. So tell me, instead: How is the bruise two fingers down from your left collarbone. How has the areola of its clot resolved its bloom. Are you happier now than you once were. Why don’t you tell me the story now. How are you, love. Are you happy.

Meanwhile, I’ve lost my reason. Not in a particular sense, like a madman—just lost it. For a specific question, an argument. I forget which one. Maybe you would call it an excuse. Maybe you would understand. But I’ve lost my reason, and I don’t know where to start looking. Yes, I’ve checked under my bed. I found nothing there but dust bunnies, hairballs, crumpled up pieces of paper, bodies of insects. Heaven knows I am not looking for these things. I checked my bag, every single compartment, between the pages of books and notebooks, laid everything out neatly in piles on my bed. Still didn’t find it. I searched my cabinet drawers, went through all the pockets of every article of clothing in my possession, wallets, shopping bags, laundry bags, suitcases. No luck. No dice. All empty. No reason to be found. The eye of the storm, I said. Where is it. But this is not what I was looking for. This is not what I have lost. I turn my head, wondering what to do with the ones on my bed, still sitting down, just twiddling their thumbs, waiting. Slowly piling up.
I was looking out the window and into the street. He was saying: *Isn’t it nice out.* We were slogging through the mud. *This is my favorite kind of day.* I said nothing. Only turned to him. *Well, what do you think.* Outside, the world was gray. This was part of the story too. He was grinning. He had forgotten to trim his nose hair. *What were you going to say.* His hands were a mile away. *Well.* I said nothing. Only looked back.

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Understand: the self is a selfish creature. It doesn’t know what to do with its hands. What to do with its teeth. Its hunger. But does it have a choice. And would that redeem it. Once, in a different story, it knew how to tend to its own wounds. It knew how to look at them, sniff them out, call them names, and laugh at them. How to point at them with its fingers. Figure out what to do. How to do it. Grab them by the shoulders and wrestle them to the edge of the cliff. Kiss them on the mouth and tell them it loves them with feeling. Dance them silly when it starts to rain hardest and trees start breaking and cars start getting smashed up. *This is what propels the story forward, after all.* Even if it doesn’t know how to dance. Even if it steps on every single one of their toes. Even if it doesn’t know forgiveness. Even if it is a stranger to itself.

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So I thought I could create one for myself, just for personal use: Because. *Because*—and I thought that that was the answer. And I thought I had finally found it. I thought I could finally stop looking, and I could jump around, and I could finally shove off all the other crap that had started piling up on my bed. I could begin sleeping again—because. Because because. Because because because because. This was it. This was everything. This was the answer. Because, I screamed at the world. Because. Because, I screamed at the lightning. Because. Because, I screamed at forgiveness. Because.

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I wish you would take it. I wish you would take it from my hands. I’m tired of always keeping it to myself, keeping it here, keeping it close. Keeping it quiet. Sometimes it wakes me up at night because it doesn’t say anything. *And then the windows flash.* Why won’t it say anything. *And then the water starts getting in.* Why doesn’t it move at all. *And then thunder shakes the building.* And suddenly there are other eyes staring open into the dark. Why won’t it answer when I ask it a question. When I look it straight in the eye and start begging. When I corner it, when I offer it food,
when I tell it to stop fucking around this is serious, when I give up and start kicking things. *And then the sky collapses.* Why won't you take it.

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Because it is raining and there are more important things to think about. Because this country shouldn't have to mark the passage of time with storms. Because it does, nevertheless. Because six to nine of them make landfall on average every year, and that average is rising. Because the seas are rising. Because they like to break trees and smash up cars. Because we are never prepared for the next time. Because we ought to be by now. Because people deserve to make it out of these things alive, their clothes dry, their bodies dry, their houses and money and children dry, even if outside, the streets are all covered in garbage. Floating.

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*Here,* he says. *Take it. Here is the eye of the storm.* But this is not what I wanted. This is not what I was looking for. But what can I do, whom shall I turn to. *This is the story.* On a night just like this, shall I make to turn out the light. *No.* Adrift in the upsurge, shall the floodwaters carry this plea. *Or else.* Shall I look at the storms outside instead, hold my breath. Shall I see what they do, holding nothing back. *And shall I look back.* No. But what of the wind and its infinite insistences. What of the cool of its bite. What of its resignation, its desperate, doubling as consummate, doubled over. *This is the story.* Its intentness, its intent. *Here, take this storm.* The storm with its eye. The storm with its eye looking back through the window. Looking at us. *This is the story.* Answering resilience with relentlessness. Assuming nothing.