SLANTED SIGNPOSTS:
MIND, MEMORY, AND THE MATTER OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

Spurred by questions raised in the student's studies in neuroscience, cognitive science, and the philosophy of mind, *Slanted Signposts* seeks to consider the question of how molecular memory formation relates to identity through exploratory writing. The field of neuroscience details well the neuronal correlates of consciousness, but often leads to a limited idea of identity, based solely on memory formed from molecular conversations between neurons. This work acts as a creative exploration of issues such as memory loss, neurological illness, and trauma through essay, poetry, and short story form. It draws primarily from neuroscience, philosophy, and consideration of the author's family cultures and experience with neurological illness. The work strives to offer an alternate suggestion of identity and self that is based on choices and actions in the present rather than memory. However, all aspects of cognition—choices, tastes, beliefs, and characteristics, in addition to memory—can easily be altered through neuronal damage and trauma. While there are increasing grounds for hope for restoration and reparation through top-down and bottom-up approaches to neuroplasticity, the fragility of the brain and its potential for healing ultimately lead to the conclusion human identity, in general, must always be grounded in the fundamental value of life rather than one's memories, choices, personality, or behaviors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Demyelinate—*to destroy or remove the myelin sheath of (a nerve fiber), as through disease.*

i. i saw you walking,
nameless
stuttering down roads without signs
or mile markers
trying to gather up
all the strands of fiber
and yarn that came unraveled

ii. each time i travel this path
in my mind the signposts
are slanted at slightly different
angles i weave
a new tapestry
whenever I come back
through these skeins

iii. if Theseus' ship
constructed with fresh timber
changing by single freshwood plank
exacting again the shape
of the original vessel
might not be
the same at all
what am i
as i reloom my thoughts
events in different spaces
places recolored how i choose?
how can one say
i am the same?
and what do you do
without even the yarn
with which to weave?

Of Mind, Matter, and Memory

Although the ideas of the duality between the realm of the mind and the physical realm are outdated, given continuous developments in the field of neuroscience, scientists and philosophers are left with unsubstantiated but thoughtful models of consciousness, neural correlates of cognitive activities, and ever abounding mysteries. Because of these unanswered questions, one might view approaches to concepts of mind, memory, and identity that are purely materialistic as somewhat reductive. As an undergraduate student in the biological sciences, I was instructed in the core tenets of neuroscience as per the renowned Nobel Laureate Erik Kandel, who wrote the magnificent tome, *The Principles of Neural Science.* Kandel is a keen and vibrant scientist, having discovered physical underpinnings of learning and memory formation. He and many other biological scientists attempt to understand all mental processes from the standpoint of molecular mechanisms occurring within the neurons—elegant nerve cells that connect through chemical and electrical processes to strengthen their bonds and form the basis of mental activity.

Neural Correlates of Consciousness

The term "engram" is used to describe the physical change or structure formed in the brain by an event. For example, the strengthening of a connection between two neural cells by way of neurotransmitter release in response to learning how to navigate a new neighborhood could be referred to as an engram. The most prevalent view in the biological sciences regarding memory and selfhood is the idea that we are made up of molecularly formed memories, engrams, and those constitute our entire identity. However, an engram is merely a neural correlate of the cognitive aspect of memory. As Dr. Yasmin Dudai, an Israeli neurobiologist put it: "Can memory, a cognitive process, be truly reduced to the biological engram? … Is the engram a representation of the world in the brain? Or is it a representation

of the brain in the world?" He questions if these cognitive processes are reducible to the biological constraints, referring to the problem of the qualitative distance between the physical engram as a physical record and the psychological mechanism and the nature of memory as a cognitive process. Despite this, Dr. Dudai like many other biological scientists considers memory to be our identity, stating that "we are, in many respects, what we remember".

Other scientists, such as the physicist Sir Roger Penrose and Dr. Stuart Hameroff, have developed a more esoteric theory on the origin of consciousness, positing that these cognitive processes are occurring not just via synaptic interactions between neurons, but in the microtubules, skeletal structures within the nerve cells. They surmise consciousness occurs within the microtubules on a quantum level—specifically, consciousness occurs at the moment of quantum collapse. And yet, this theory only elevates the complexity of the idea that we are nothing more than a reservoir of mechanistic memories formed in the brain.

Epigenetic Memory

It is fascinating to consider genes were once considered immutable and fixed, divvied up from one's mother and father to create a new variation. However, scientists began to witness changes to genes happening in relation to choices and experiences. Much in the way that our neural synapses can respond to our conscious choices of thought and feeling and learning, severing, and strengthening their bonds to physically reflect the patterns of our mind, so do our genes ravel and unravel, coming into physical being in the form of protein, or not, as they observe our actions and develop their bodily consequences. This process is known as epigenetic memory, referring specifically to changes in our ancestor's genes passed down through generations, a shared bodily memory. These physical memories can be formed in genes throughout the body in our own lifetimes based on environmental factors, stress, diet, exercise, etc. Forms of epigenetic memory in the body's cells carry on even when memories

in the brain are lost. However, even these bodily memories that can be shaped by our environments and the environments of our ancestors still fail to answer for the individual responses people choose in response to their memories and immediate environments, or their choices in the present when conscious or mental memory is absent.

Erik Kandel's idea that "Memory is everything. Without it we are nothing," takes on deeper nuances when one considers the changes in the body that occur as well as those that happen in the neural pathways of the brain. Not only can genetic data be transmitted from parent to child, but so can the epigenetic data; the "above and beyond" genetic information of a parents' experiences is given to their child as well. The mitochondrial code, the cell's source of power, strengthened by physical effort in a mother will impart robust energy sources to offspring, as only the mother has the power to alter these reservoirs of power for her child. The genes of a parent struck by poverty and famine will pass on maps of hunger to be written in the bodies of their children. Therefore, memories of pain or grief, strength or joy, are written down and preserved in the body even when lost by the mind.

Memory Revision

In *The Molecular and Systems Biology of Memory,* Erik Kandel again emphasizes the vital importance of memories, asserting that: "Memory is the glue that holds our mental life together. Without its unifying power, both our conscious and unconscious life would be broken into as many fragments as there are seconds in the day. Our life would be empty and meaningless". Again, herein lies the problem: materialists, contending we are made up of memories, do not explain who we are when memories are lost, or why there exist so many varying responses to similar memories, and they contradict the growing body of literature in the realm of neuroscience and cognitive science concerning the plasticity of the brain, the potentiality of choice, and the fact our memories, if one can maintain them, are altered each

time we recall them. Although this may be a frightening notion at first, it means that humans are given the ability to change how they view the past and the present, to choose what to focus on, to rewrite the very meaning behind their memories.

This ability is not necessarily good or evil, and the way we write these memories, the stories we choose to tell about ourselves, reveal much about our identity and form our perception of the world. Scientists once assumed our brains and memories were like intricate, but thoroughly understandable, machines. Machines that encoded and stored memories with both precision and accuracy, playing out pre-written programs, holding the shapes of our identities. We were algorithms programming the patterns of our thought and choice; humans as mere automatons heeding the call of our neuronal code. It must be noted that some primal reflexes do exist in the wiring of our brain and body, connected as one, but with the advent of the discovery of synaptic plasticity, it seems the source of our neural programs are the thoughts and choices we entertain in our daily lives, shaping those intricate machines—not the other way around. Even memories themselves alter each time they are recalled; the power of humanity shown in its ability to write and rewrite its own maps of meaning. Each time we revisit a memory, it enters a vulnerable state, ready to be revised at our desire.

Conclusion

While it cannot be argued much of our experience does shape our tastes, personality, choices, and perception of future experiences, the declaration that our identity is our memory, a memory specifically composed of molecular mechanisms in the brain is bold, unsubstantiated, and undermines important components of both the human experience and human biology. It is my belief this particular materialist perspective readily breaks down when considering epigenetic memory; the gut-brain-microbial axis; it fails to account for the constructed selves of those with neurological illness, brain damage, or trauma that leads to loss

of conscious memories; and, importantly, the fact that our memories can be rewritten each time we revisit them. These conflicting concepts can be greatly altered by choices, or what is known as a "top-down" effect, and our choices can be influenced by the mechanisms, memories, and feelings held in our body, the "bottom-up" effect. If our identity is memory, how does someone with memory loss form choices and decide how they act in the moment? How do we choose to change our perceptions of past events to move forward? How do we choose to overcome the friction of changing our diet or environment to result in healthier epigenetic patterns and microbial biomes? How does a change in our microbiome or subsequent physical health greatly alter how we act and perceive without also altering our memories? While the following creative work may not be able to answer all these questions or ensuing questions about consciousness itself, I intend to pose an argument that calls into question the reductive concept of identity as only stemming from molecular memory in the brain and offers an alternative view of identity as the choices made in each present moment, shifting, mutable, and perhaps because of these characteristics, in a sense, always redeemable.

memento vitae

Lost scatter-dust tangled in a web of I look for a mask

waste dredges up in the angles of my mind
connections like a brittle vine
the strands too
broken to climb

Severed
yet always grasping to bind back again
tendrils broken across time and space

i am not
will not
is not
was not
could not
i do not
untied knot i am unravelled

make me a kaleidoscope as I
an unexplained impetus

if you can't remember the tree falling
in the forest
did it really make a
sound

the circle must not start broken before its
atms
reach
another
junction between two
nerve cells

for
mislay mind and memory
rebirth

1899, medical Latin, from Greek synapsis "conjunction,"
to clasp join together

from Greek neura "nerve"; originally "sinew, bowstring,"
in plural
"strength,"

vigor,"
honey and sun
are the only mementos
of who I am

be connected with
tie or bind to
from syn "together" + haptein "to
fasten"

Blunt Force

A honey-soft gaze before confusion mires through. He's an ex-militia man, a glaze-striped scar streaks across his skull, reminding us of his past, even when he forgets
how to tell a prostitute from a date, a doctor from an enemy. He came here for the land of the free except
the plane ticket, phone, food, insurance, rent, all need to be paid back to the government. He grins and straightens his collar, trying to organize the months and put the days in their place. Slurry-eyed hospital residents say there's no brain damage visible—just insert pills here like he's a computer needing a new input. Switch it up every couple months. The depression will lift
now he says he's fearless, he says he's tearless. Added to the list of things he can't remember or understand:
what it's like to
feel.
those doctors-in-training-too-tired-to-sleep-to-see-another-refugee are the experts, aren't they?
any body could see the dregs of damage lashed across his cranium, burning sweet, sugar glaze. We've all heard what happens to those bygone football players after clashes with a staged enemy.
an ally says to find a neuropsychologist—"professionals in this branch of psychology often focus on how injuries or illnesses of the brain affect cognitive functions and behaviors".
—but we don't take Medicaid
—we specialists only work for the overserved
—we take Medicaid, but no one has twice the time for interpretation.
you know it's required by law?
—neuropsychological evaluations are a prize only for those who learned the English tongue before their TBI.
why?
—it's not in the budget.
—they're not in the budget
(they can't say it to his face)—you're not in the budget.

red-line, yellow-tape, red-tape, red-wired, hot-wired, booby trapped by the bureaucrats who say maybe you should just go back from where you came

or maybe they just want us to forget what it's like to feel
for each other.
he can't hear those words

so he'll keep sludging through the streets and watching the sparrow fly over the Sonoran sky until someone sees him.

Fevered Memory

Bubbles rise higher than the milk-beams of sorrow;
the weary town sleeps.

I dance through the sea; salt and chill and sweat until
The fever frees me.

If she would join me, singing under the cyprus
I would breathe, released

From the shadow-grasp. Black ink leaks under the door;
my fate remains sealed.

Save One

A Pantun of Forgetfulness

Our bird of thunder clutches the dry-lake ember
He slices a light thread beyond sun-kissed infinity
The source of my sorrow I tried to remember
A forgotten sting carves through me with gravity

Slicing a light thread beyond fog-lit infinity
So withers the phantom of the dove's monsoon-sky
An ache forgotten stretches out with levity
Derelict, your buried guilt will not subside

The haze of monsoon heights fades with the dove's cry
Blood of the juniper strewn across the sun
Under the sand your hidden cries can't turn the tide
We could free nothing in the dry-lake flood save one

Barren Mind

Zhedea's fingertips combed through the soft, pale ash, rummaging for the thin twigs of willow wood. Stripped of bark, and carved into rods of various width, the reed-like sticks would be perfect for drawing. Zhedea had tended this fire for over an hour, holding no images in her mind, thinking of nothing. Zhedea stripped, carved, cooked, and wore through these new sticks often. She consulted her instruction sheet each time; a slip of paper tacked inside her leather journal with old gum. A list of names and notes lay on the opposite page from her instruction sheet, scribbled in a disoriented script, all but the last one crossed out: *For Micah—draw a picture of the blue beyond mountains, so ~~he~~ we will never forget the day the desert fell.* She could not recall if she wrote the instruction sheet herself, or if someone gave them to her. She shrugged off this thought and the dark bead of sweat that was mixing with the dust and ash on her skin. The setting sun, melting the primordial boulders and red-speckled sand to liquid gold, touched and lit her face with the same tawny-rose pigment painted across the clouds. The light did not touch the distant haze of the grey-blue silhouettes of the mountains, ever lost to mist and dust.

She sat next to the fire ring; the large hole dug into the ground circled with rows of stones increasing their size toward the innermost ring. Pulling out a thin willow-wand, she tapped off the ashes against one of the larger stones. The stick crumbled into coal-shards and cinder-dust. She rubbed the remaining soot into her fingers, trying to think of what went wrong. When she pressed her fingertips up her forearm, the patterns looked like galaxies, and they tugged her attention into them. Struggling to release her mind from itself, she drew her gaze up and out.

The tin. The blackened canister lay forgotten in the sand. She read the instructions twice again: *Step 3: place the willow strips in the tin.* Her body felt as though it were trying to walk

under the water, a force pressing her thoughts backward each time she tried to move them forward, her limbs pulled downward. She sighed, pulled the remaining strips of willow bark out of her bag, and began stoking the under-embers with a long branch, preparing to light the fire anew.

The creature of wandering-white flesh regarded her. Pleasure filled it at the sight of her emptiness. It did not understand that despite her emptiness, she still kept the flame.

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The little yellow town of Odan grew out in a circular fashion from the community gathering area, a row of rocks and logs surrounding a firepit. There were a few remainders of the thatched adobe homes the people lived in before the miners came, foundations of scattered red brick disintegrating into piles of sand and straw. Beyond this stood the hundred-year-old houses of the mining camp master and his foremen: elegant, angled, and curved with gables, front porches, and picket-white fences strutting up from the ground like stakes in the packed desert earth. The town had revolted against the foremen, and now the mayor, banker, doctor—whoever deemed themselves important enough to rack up a salary large enough to afford those homes, lived in them. The people of Odan continued to mine deep into their own earth, shipping ore to those beyond the badlands, making a scarce living. After this circle lay the modest, square homes of the rest of the townspeople, sitting on concrete foundations and tarred roads, the people untethered from their earth.

Our bird of thunder skimmed the surface of the air; he sliced a light-thread in the murky infinity beyond the yellow town's reaches. Zhedea walked down an ever-unfamiliar dirt road, concentrating on following a straight path until she reached the bridge. She did not know the ground beneath her feet, but the earth knew her. From the desert to the distant mountains, ever dim and caerulean—the desert-earth knew her well.

As Zhedea crossed the bridge of the *arroyo*, in the fourth circle of the west quarter of the town, she stumbled, touched by the land. The *arroyo* vanished, and she found herself balancing along a river, hemmed with cotton wood trees and bright people in fishing canoes. A child with a herd of sheep stood on the other side of the river and met his gaze with hers. All it took was a certain time of day—the light angling off buildings or through trees with a certain glint—or an orientation, a curve along the road and a row of buildings where adobe homes once stood, and she would find herself lost between two worlds. The air of the land dissolved time's illusion in her barren mind, sundering the edges between past, present, and future. She realized there had once been an ageless river flowing in this earth cavity. She did not know if she had been told that before and fumbled for her notebook in her bag, quick to write this down.

Looking up from her notebook she turned her gaze up and down the *arroyo* bridge. She didn't know which direction she came from. Was she heading from the west or the east? Was her home located through the center of the town to her left, or had she already gone to the other side of the town center? She looked at her notebook again. She hadn't written where she was. Just: *the arroyo used to be a river*. Very helpful. The high moon cast a bright glow on her page, adding to her disorientation. She had thought it was still the blue of a just set sun. No one would be out in the town at this time. She could wait until the light-before-dawn when the miners would be heading to the copper-quarry. Someone would find her. Maybe if she just went straight, she would recognize something. Or went straight and followed the curve to the right. She lost the feeling of her arms and legs as the bridge spun around her. She sank down onto the wooden slats of the bridge, feeling the rough knots against the smooth bark, grounding herself with the sensation of the wood under her, breathing slowly.

"Zhedea?" Luca pushed his just-too-large wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose. "Are you okay?"

She smiled at her half-brother, his dusty-brown curls glinting around his face like a halo. "I was just checking the structural integrity of the bridge," she lied, trying not to worry him.

He laughed, held out a hand, and pulled her up with his small, wiry frame. "All good?"

"It should last a few more days."

"Let's go home, Mom is mad that you're lost again. We have a visitor, some friend of dad's. She wanted your help getting the guestroom ready."

Zhedea nodded, feeling both guilty and grateful to have not been present for this interaction, worried what Luca's mother would have to say in the morning. She followed Luca home through the soft light. Some of the houses revealed families reading, talking, laughing after their evening meal. Zhedea stared with a hungry gaze. Sometimes, seeing Zhedea, a stout mother would shutter the main window, pulling away curious children. As if the sickness of a barren mind was contagious. Luca pulled Zhedea toward the other side of the street and would begin telling stories about the antics of the lambs in spring and what he hoped to carve for his friends on their birthdays. Zhedea wanted to ask Luca if he knew of any birthday parties she had ever been invited to. At this moment, Zhedea did not remember if she knew anyone in this town, but she must, she lived here for her entire life. She stopped herself, knowing this would only concern the boy more.

Their home was on the outermost ring of town, no neighbors for half a mile to the left and right, and the dark expanse of the desert behind them. This gave them room for a small garden and a few animals.

"I already fed them," Luca said. "You should get some sleep. It's late. I'll let mom know you're home."

The floorboards creaked as she slipped into her room through the kitchen. She turned on her lamp and checked her notebook one last time: *If a human being's self is just a collection of memories and past experiences, who and what do they become when those are lost? What informs someone's choices if they can't remember what came before?*

Zhedea tried to cast a vision of the future, to pull a thread of memory to unravel the past. She could see no farther back than a few weeks. Feeding the goats, playing with Luca, checking her journal, cooking, checking her journal again, all images blending in a lifeless haze against a yellow-grey sky. She had nothing but a dim sense of the world following the same pattern as the past day, and the possibility it would continue to do so the next day. She called for images of her mother and father, wondering if the features of her body recalled theirs. Nothing appeared but pictures of empty faces, sounds of hollow voices, and streaked colors like a damaged watercolor painting. Her head swam and she gave up the exercise, flipping toward the front of her journal only to find smudged charcoal, as meaningless as the pictures in her head. The ground seemed as though it might give way underneath her at any moment. Who could say if that was not the usual order of the world? She flung her journal aside and fell onto the bed. "I am nothing," she whispered, both in realization and resolution. She wrapped the blanket tightly around her body as she wept herself into the void.

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Zhedea thought by the time she came this far into the Blue Beyond she would have scaled great heights, standing on a cliff of evergreens at the top of the world, but the pass to the mountains were straggled with foothills for miles, foothills that could not be seen from Odan and the lowland desert through the dust and the mist. On this side of the canopy,

though, she could clearly see through to the town. She could make out the central gathering place surrounded by the large, old houses of the masters. The mines in the south, like a gaping ulcer in the land, cornered with smokestacks and the mineral-machines. The air was still warm in these hills, but felt crisp and full, untarnished by smoke and copper-dust. To the north, the mountains remained dark and muted. She could barely see the outlines of the failed northern mining shafts, silent and dead.

She walked down the crest of the saddle and then turned off onto a deer trail, following it to a lower ridge. She was careful to turn her body sideways, flush with the side of the steep hill, feet firmly planted in the scattering of loose rocks and red sand and occasional bursts of yucca root. Did she come this way before with Micah? With her father?

Birds of thunder bellowed over the mountains, close enough to shake the foundations of the earth under the hills. Zhedea's right foot lost its purchase and skidded down across the rocks, bringing the rest of her body with it. It felt as though the whole mountain range had been tilted to shake her off the hillside. Thorns pierced her hands and thigh as she grasped at century plants and stray bushes to stop her descent. A shower of rocks poured over the edge of an umber-colored sandstone wall with Zhedea as she slid into a deep, sandy ravine.

She pulled herself up from the sand, caught her breath, and wiped the muddied blood of her hands onto her pants, sucking at a few throbbing sores. The earth seemed to have stopped shaking. The air was moist and cool down here, the high walls keeping all but the top of the ravine in shadow. Her heartbeats themselves struck like thunder and lightning, drumming through her with power and strength. She laughed.

"I've been waiting for you. I was hoping you would come back."

A pallid, white man stood before her, a few feet away in the sand. He gleamed like a cold moon in winter. His skin seemed too small for his body, stretched taut across his high

cheekbones, his bare chest, his ribs emerging from his torso as if they sought freedom from their suffocating enclosure. His lips were frayed and bloody at the edges of the cracks. The smell of rot and must surged around him, deadening the air. There was something decidedly familiar about him though, his black eyes, his long, elegant hands. Zhedea compulsively moved closer. "Who are you?" she asked.

"I was hoping you would come back," he echoed.

"I've been here before?"

"I have been so hungry," he smiled. "Let's finish what we started—then you can be at peace." The Uwetaga placed one hand on her neck and the other over her head, clawing into her scalp and throat. Zhedea screamed noiselessly.

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"It's his daughter, from his first marriage to that…woman. Rest their souls. Now only my sweet son and I are left to care for her. Poor girl…her mind is barren…she has the touch of the desert…do they have this illness where you are from? I don't see how she will ever be able to work in the mines. She can barely understand how to do daily chores. Like a small child. Can I offer you more tea?"

Zhedea woke to hear Leah talking in the kitchen, her clear, resonant voice cutting through their thin walls. Another voice, soft and low harmonized with Leah, it must be the guest, but she couldn't make out any of their responses. The list on Zhedea's wall told her what to do in the morning, what to do after dinner. She decided to forego breakfast and opened the window of her bedroom and slid out into the garden of sunflowers, corn, beans, squash, and a selection of herbs. Careful not to tread on her plants, she walked through the garden, past the back porch and toward the stable where the sheep, goat, and chickens waited to be let out into the yard.

The kitchen door flung open over the back porch. Leah stood, one hand holding the door, the other hand on her hip. She was not that much older than Zhedea, not more than ten years, with honey-brown skin, honey-brown curls, and an impressive height that filled the small doorframe. Zhedea froze.

"Zhedea! How many times do we have to have this discussion? That fool boy ran out to find you when he realized you were gone. I have no way of keeping him here when he thinks you might be in trouble. Do you realize my baby could have been bitten by snakes or kidnapped or lost in the desert looking for you?"

Zhedea said nothing. She did realize that.

"You're going to have to do all the dishes for a week, just to remind you not to do this again."

Zhedea nodded.

"Are you even hearing what I am saying to you? What do I have to tell you about staying out after dark?"

"I forgot what time it was," she said, beginning to shake. Leah's loud voice pealed in her ears, making her feel dizzy.

"Can't you see the sky? Or did you forget that darkness means that the sun is down?"

"I mean, I didn't realize the sun had set. And I was lost."

"Of course, you were," Leah snapped, resting the palm of her hand on her forehead. "Well, calm down, Zhedea. You are just going to have to stop leaving our property without someone with you. It's not like before when you could take care of your own self." Zhedea turned away and remorse crossed Leah's face momentarily. "Put on some clean clothes and get some food when you're done with the animals, you look like a raccoon with all that soot

on your face." She turned back inside. "Poor thing, she can't help it," she said to their guest as the kitchen door slammed and bounced, once, twice, and remained closed.

The well-water pumped out in lovely shades of brown and orange, dancing with black metal flecks. Zhedea ran the water through a makeshift strainer before pouring it into the animals' trough but noted the water seemed to be getting worse in her notebook, on page 17, *sketches on water quality*, shaded with varying tones of charcoal. The quarries came closer to Odan with each season, and sometimes their effects ran deep into the underground water reserves. Leah said it was the reason why her mother's hair had fallen out, why she had died so young. Zhedea let out the animals and noticed the listless demeanor of the goat as he staggered to their feeding trough with the sheep. Perhaps he was just getting old. Luca might know.

She went in the kitchen for breakfast, but the guest was gone, back out to the low-ceilinged guest house, one of the last adobe buildings in the town, built by Zhedea's father. Luca came out and sat down at the folding table, wearing his school uniform, vibrating with excitement for his day. "After I finish grade school, will I get to go to the same school as you and Zhedea's brother, Mom?"

Leah smiled. She placed two bowl of hominy on the table for them. "Maybe so, Luca, but that's a long way off."

"Well, I wouldn't want to go unless Zhedea came with me, of course," he grinned. Leah slammed a jar on the counter and started beating a ball of dough. Zhedea smiled and patted Luca on the back. "I'm already too old, silly. I missed my chance to go to the school."

"Yeah, but we stick together. I wouldn't want to leave you—"

"Enough, Luca! There is no reason Zhedea needs your doting. She's an adult and you two have separate lives to live."

Luca and Zhedea were quiet for the rest of breakfast. After Luca left, Leah slid into his seat at the table, resting her head in her hands. "I'm sorry," she whispered, after a time. "You know, your father loved her more than me."

"I don't think that's true," Zhedea said, not certain how else to respond. Leah laughed. "How could you know? You have a barren mind. You can't remember anything. I saw him, every night, when he thought I was asleep, staring at that picture of hers. Of course, I kept it for his sake. I loved him. I kept the things he loved for his sake."

"What happened to her?" Zhedea asked.

Leah tossed her curls back over her shoulder and stood up. "You'll just forget again." Zhedea was certain no one had ever told her. It wasn't in her notebook. But Leah knew. Leah picked up the wicker laundry basket to wash outside and paused. "And Zhedea? Make sure you stay away from our guest. I think she will only upset you."

"Luca said she was a friend of my father's."

"Hm, you remembered something. How impressive. But believe me," Leah leaned toward Zhedea, lowering her voice, trying to win her over with a girlish smirk that made Zhedea uncomfortable, "she's completely crazy."

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She always knew where she was when she arose in the morning. Other people often reported not knowing their location when rising from sleep on a trip, thinking, just for a moment, they must still be in their own beds, in their own homes. But despite her frequent disorientation, she was granted a certain clear-water clarity upon waking and her body always knew with which earth it sat. What she did not know was where the ache in her neck came from, the cold, biting pain that ran through her when she touched under her jaw, the swollen wound on her thigh and the cuts in her palms. She lifted herself up, biting her lips to distract

from the pain in her leg. A forgotten torment held a physical space in her chest and a weighed on her body without holding a place in her mind. She tried to remember the source of her sorrow; she could not. She could only choose to move forward. She scanned for something to help the swelling on her leg. A juniper bush called to her, stretching its branches toward her in aid. She stepped through the grass, a mix of yellow-green and yellow-dry. The juniper fruit was waxy and pleasant to squeeze between her thumb and forefinger, a dark seed popping out. They stained her hands with a sweet-pine smell.

"Zhedea, you shouldn't be playing in here," her father said, hoisting her off the pine boards resting between the two sawhorses. The work shed smelled of warm gin and wood shavings. Zhedea froze, staring up at her father, his long hair tied behind his back, black, reflecting the light of the lamp behind him, his dark eyes clearer than she thought they should be. "I'm sorry for snapping, little one," he said. He took off his hat and crouched down to her level. He sighed. "It's your mom. She is not getting any better. The doctors don't know what's wrong with her, if it might be contagious."

Zhedea crossed her arms, round, small, firm. "I told you it's her neck. There are hands on her neck. You just need to get them off."

Her father smiled, but his face looked pained. He squeezed her shoulder with his large, weathered hand. "We'll do our best. But for now…this is for the best, I promise…you're going to stay with Mrs. Cartagena and her family for a little while."

"You can't send me away. You and mom need me. I'll take care of you."

"I know, little one, but this is to keep you safe. And Mrs. Cartagena's daughter will be there. Remember Leah? She went to the same school Micah is at. She can teach you all kinds of things. You'll have so much fun together."

Zhedea ground the waxy berries, the leaves with their crisscross patterns, and the smooth twigs into a mash between the indent in a boulder and a large stone. As the smell of gin dissipated from the air, she spat into the mess of powder, smelling of the deep wicking-green that lies at the center of all growing things.

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"Your fire burns black," the woman said. Their guest stood firmly, with a broad, sun-leather brown face, a tunic of blue, orange, and red, her grey hair billowing out in every direction. A scar ran jagged down her left cheek. Zhedea looked back down at her drawing, of a woman standing by a lake. "I know," she replied. "But it hasn't gone out." Zhedea was not sure what she had meant by that. The woman squinted at her. "Your flame is weak. Fading. You must rekindle it to burn right again. For the sake of us all."

Zhedea glared at her. This woman *was* crazy. "It's not my fault. Weren't you told? I have a barren mind. I have no memories. You don't have anything if you don't have memories."

"Oh?" The woman scoffed. "How do you know that you have no memories if you cannot remember anything?" She looked pleased with this observation. "Let me tell you something, little one. You, and anyone else on this planet only exist in this moment. Whether you call it present or future or past, makes no difference. It's only this moment. Ever since our people stepped into this universe, we have all been *now*. And you are whoever you choose to be in this now."

"But I don't know who I am. I don't remember!" Zhedea snapped. Why was she angry at this old woman? The woman leaned her face into Zhedea, nearly knocking foreheads with her. "Did you ever consider that this may be a gift? You are unburdened by anything that could influence who you choose to be. Your decision will be pure. I have been all over this

town, not a single person has been able to face what you have faced and kept their fire lit. And now you sit here, giving up on them, feeling sorry for yourself, calling yourself empty-headed!"

"What do you mean, giving up on them?"

"Look around you, Zhedea."

On the porch sat Leah, her head leaning against the dry-wood wall. Her eyes blank and listless. She could see Luca rhythmically throwing a ball in his room. Down the road, a car stalled as a man walked in circles around it. "Your mother couldn't stop it, Zhedea, but you can."

"What is happening?" Zhedea demanded.

"What do you think has happened? The desert has sent out its judgement. It has taken their memories. You are all barren-minded."

"How long have we been like this?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is what you are going to do about it."

***

Zhedea ran to the desert, past the quarries, and tall houses, the short hovels, and small shops, the dirt roads, and clusters of creosote bushes. She needed to reach the firepit, she had to light a fire. She gathered bundles of grass and dried wood, stacking the branches at right angles before waking the sleeping coals with her flint.

The smoke mingled with the warm clouds of the midday sun. What was this fire's purpose? Zhedea dropped on the red sand and flipped open her notebook. She saw her instruction sheet for making drawing tools of willow. Pulling raw-wood sticks from her bag, she took a deep breath and set to stripping and carving them down into smooth rods. She had

a sense she had forgotten something as she placed them on a stone in the fire. She always felt that way.

The Uwetaga stood in the shaded grove of mesquite trees, his white and black colors blending with the sunlight and shadow, watching her emptiness. What it could not understand is that though she was lost in the dark, she still kept the flame.

***

A puff of dust lilted in the evening wind. The earth vibrated with the hum of the unseen cicadas. Zhedea lay on the life-loam, resting her chin on top of her hands. The infinitesimal beings of the soil moved in her and out of her, speaking to her body and hewing it into shapes of strength and vitality. With her eyes closed, she could feel the earth's pulsing heartbeat wrapping its mantle around her, drawing her into the core at the same time lifting her weight up to the sky with verdurous might.

Something grabbed her arm, drawing her up, putting teeth to skin. Zhedea's screams fell away to giggles as her mother nibbled her fingers and tickled her small frame. "You shouldn't stay out after the sun goes down or the Uwetaga will get you!" she boomed, in the fake, deep voice she used whenever she quoted Zhedea's father. Zhedea brushed her mother's shining black hair out of her face and squirmed away. "You can't catch me!"

Goko stiffened when she burst through the door, slamming the wood shut, rattling its adobe frame. "Zhedea, what in the world—"

"The Uwetaga is coming!"

"Nom nom nom!" her mother yelled. Goko lifted her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips. She smiled at Zhedea. Reaching over her head she latched the door. "Not tonight Uwetaga. This is the house of the T'sokan and we no longer serve your master. You must fear us."

There was a moment of silence. "If I promise not to eat you?" her mother sang from behind the door. Her voice had lifted back to its normal register, wide as the sky with laughter at the edges, only sounding in her mother's tongue here in the house beyond the town.

Goko frowned. "And if you should suddenly become get hungry?"

"Well, I don't just eat flesh and soul. I'm hungry for some wild corn too."

Goko looked at Zhedea, lips pursed, making crinkles in her sun-leathered face. "Hmm, I don't know about this. This one could be trying to pull a fast one on us, Zhedea."

"Okay, it's getting cold out here. Let me in!" her mother cried. Goko rolled her eyes and unlatched the door as her mother tumbled in, elegant but girlish. "You wouldn't be so cold if you had the sense to bring your coat, Anket. You know the chill takes hold fast in the wilds of this desert."

Her mother shrugged and laughed. "You know how absent-minded I am."

"Don't I?" Goko asked, looking up at her from the pot of the soup cooking in the center of the round, one-roomed house.

Zhedea looked up at her mother who gave her a small shake of her head. Zhedea felt Goko watching them out of the corner of her eye, but her grandmother went to stir the large pot of slow-simmering soup over the fire in the center of the house as if she hadn't noticed anything. Her mother's coat, lined with sheepskin and colored with blue and yellow flower dyes was one of the many things Zhedea noticed had been disappearing from their home, along with the loom, the radio, even the old butter churn. At first her mother, upon finding something lost, would enlist Zhedea to help her search the house, turning their little home upside down to find it before her father got home. But they never succeeded in finding anything. If Zhedea asked about a lost item now, her mother only told her to be quiet, sharpness rather than laughter in the edges of her voice. If she could remember it, of course.

Goko laid out flatbread on the table while Anket spooned the soup and corn into wooden bowls. "Zhedea, hand me that…jar, please."

Zhedea looked up at the shelf rowed with several spice jars standing against the wall of cool earth. "Which one, mamma?"

Her mother frowned. "The one with there, with the-the yellower one," she stuttered.

"The *degona* root?" Goko asked, following Anket's stilted movements.

"Yes, and the red one."

"*Pabenak*."

Her mother's gaze froze for a moment, rigid, like someone asleep with their eyes open. Her body shuddered and she looked at Goko. "*Pabenak?"*

"It's your favorite spice, Anket," Goko said. "We used to grind it from the fruits of the desert malar when you were small."

"Of course."

Zhedea brought her the two spice jars, but her mother stared at them as if she had never seen them before. Without being asked, Zhedea quickly began sprinkling the bowls with equal amounts of each spice, the way her mother had taught her, in the colors of the desert sunset. At the low table, Zhedea sat on her hands so no one would see them trembling. Mamma's forgetfulness was something else they were not supposed to talk to Goko about. The ghost of her lost memories seemed to haunt her mother more than the loss of her infant child. They ate the rest of their meal in silence.

After dinner, Zhedea lay with her back to the spiraled wool rug, staring up at the dried bundles of herbs strung from the beams of the wood-warm ceiling. If she squinted her eyes in just the right way, she could see the faces of fairy-creatures amidst the flowers and leaves, their faces pulled downward in open pictures of grief, limbs of stems and roots twisted in a

death-dance waiting to pass the remnants of their life to another being. They reminded her of the face of her father, yet but that he was less willing.

Her mother had fallen on a sheepskin near the fire. In sleep, her mask of light-hearted laughter and girlish games fragmented, the wearer no longer able to hold it together with all her fingers, as intricate as the four-plaited braid she wove through Zhedea's hair in the mornings. In sleep, her face seemed older, pressed and stretched and full of fearful lines. She must have fallen into dreams of her lost baby.

Zhedea rolled over to see Goko watching her from her wooden rocking chair, silver scar glinting with its own light-pattern, gentle smoke billowing around her from her pipe. "I'm worried about Mamma," Zhedea said.

Goko stopped rocking but turned her gaze away from her.

"So I am, little one, so I am. Your mother listens to a call we cannot hear."

Zhedea picked at loose threads reaching out of the carpet. "Goko, can you tell me about the Uwetaga? Is it real?"

Goko's let her gaze flicker to the sleeping Anket, and then back to Zhedea. "I suppose you ought to know."

Her voice, speaking in the old, wide words of the desert, split the small room down to the deep caverns of the earth. "The spirit of the Uwetaga is as real and true as any living being, surely as real as you and I are now.

"People believed the Uwetaga came from the North when the mining men, who plunder the earth itself, sickened the water and brought destruction. What they do not remember is that once the Uwetaga were great stone spirits, sitting under the earth to guard us against the sorrow of the deep. When the greed of the miners dove deep into the mountains

with a lust for metal the Uwetagas communed with them and became corrupted, losing their connection with the stone and with the creator. Just as our people would."

"In their chasms of grief and emptiness, a sickness sprang forth. Secrets meant to be held in the earth seeped into the water, into the seas of the Blue Beyond. This touched the men of the North first; in the bitter winter, they would drink of the darkness. The Uwetaga now seek for people to join their ranks to try to fill their desolation, to share their same fate."

"Do you become one if they catch you?"

"If they catch you? No child, the broken spirit of the Uwetaga fill our land but you cannot become an Uwetaga except by choice. The Uwetaga only comes at our own call. When the seduction of feeling nothing and remembering nothing becomes so great, after love and desire in this world comes undone, when one is wracked by emptiness and despair and wills themselves to be succumbed by it, to end themselves, to give themselves up—then the Uwetaga will take them, then they will become a vessel for the Uwetaga's void."

Zhedea drew her knees to her chest and held herself. "How could anyone choose to be an Uwetaga?"

"If they are tired. If they are too tired."

Zhedea thought about her father sitting alone in his work shed, smiling, and hiding his bottles every time she came in. She thought about her mother abruptly dancing, laughing, then refusing to get out of bed for days. She felt the weight of tiredness pulling her down.

"But…" Goko stopped and looked at Anket, still sleeping in a tight ball on her mat. "They do need to feed. In their emptiness, they can only exist by ravaging the minds of others. I am afraid soon the Uwetaga spirit will hang over us all. People forgot their past and will soon forget who they are in the present. The water is rife with old sorrows. Our strong people now

split into shards, living as part of all the rage and pain the miners inflicted. The miners' children share in this pain. It drips away at us."

Goko's head snapped back to Zhedea; she jumped as Goko leaned forward, peering at her with black eyes that flooded her with firelight. "That is why, no matter what happens, Zhedea, you must keep the flame. Our strength may come from the earth, but our fire is within."

Zhedea frowned. She didn't understand.

"Zhedea, wake up!"

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"Don't touch me!" she screamed. She could see his dull, lost eyes in his cloud of liquor but all she saw in the face of a man now was the mining camp director who cut her mother as she failed to protect her daughter; the men who chased her, stumbling into the road while she held her infant son; the men who drove the truck that nearly took her life; the men who pulled her crushed son from her arms.

The vase broke over his shoulder and Kino dropped his hands, backing away. He melted, raining tears and sweat, liquor and mucus. "I am your husband, and I am here for you," he slurred, voice both bellowing and tightening.

Anket rocked her body back and forth on the bed. "Go away," she wailed repeatedly like a prayer, not taking a breath.

He flung the door as he went out.

Through the window, Anket saw him approach the honey-haired hired girl, Leah. He kissed her fiercely.

Visiting her mother had been her last hope to bring her baby back, but the woman would give her nothing. No secrets of reanimation. Only warnings about things beyond her

power in the Blue Beyond. Anket hardened. No more pretending laughter, no more holding onto this fallow life. She nearly twisted Zhedea's arm as she dragged her away from Goko's little hut. Selfish, crazy hag. What could be more justified? What else in this life could matter?

Only Zhedea noticed her leaving. She nestled her face in the neck of the she-goat.

Into the desert, she sought and drank all the darkness she had been warned against. She drew into the powers of the Blue Beyond, the seas, and that underbelly world of death and decay. She would find a way to bring her child back on her own. She could not lose a son twice. Hungry eyes watched her from the shadows.

His form came into being, light and beautiful, shapes of shadow and smoke against the setting sun. She tried to embrace him, but she tripped and fell through his form into rocks and sand. He had no eyes. He had no mouth. He writhed and screamed silently.

She ran from the pained creature she had hewn out of darkness, floundering up and through the desert seeking a release, not a balm but an end to her anguish. If she could not be with him, she would not exist. She raced toward a cliff at the edge of a high hill.

As she flung herself from the cliff, the earth tilted and bent itself. She was weightless one moment and the next sliding down to the bottom of a ravine. The air was thick and still with must and mold. A starving, snowy white creature approached her from the shadows. Resolute peace permeated the stillness and she found herself reaching out to it.

"You called for me?"

Its eyes were black pools. She sank into them as it took her neck and head in its hands.

A cloud of smoke rose in the desert. As a bird of thunder flapped its wings the smoke swelled outward, blocking out the setting sun. Anket's soundless shadow-shape specter dissolved. The Uwetaga cowered. An old woman's grey hair billowed through the smoke and she gathered up the half-withered woman before alighting.

If we are just memory

The hemlock rises and bellows a vacant moan at the dawn.
No branch to cling to, what is ichor alone at the dawn?

The blighted vessel grasps for a felt-fork path
tracking back to embalm them into stone before dawn.

A bloodied bine curls up without the black memory
of bruised roots; from the time it picked a bone with the dawn.

If we are just memories that are dust-scattered lost
Wherefrom comes their choice to dance roan in the dawn?

I won't be here when they arise, full of hollow webs—
for my off-keel ship, I need to atone with the dawn.

***

Zhedea sat on a ledge of red sandstone, brushing her fingers against the grainy surface. Her fingers met the long, dark fingers of the willowy boy next to her. They wove their hands together in a gentle tapestry. Tranquil light glazed over the rocks and the moss-green trees and over the deep sapphire sea that hung above the desert and beneath their feet. Behind them, in the grove, laughing children played with glowing orbs.

She smiled. "I can't remember how I got here."

His dimples disappeared. "Does that bother you?"

"No. I feel such peace here. I don't want to leave."

"But?"

"You're the boy made of trees."

He nodded with a small smile, a breeze brushing his dark wavy hair around the mossy corners of his oval eyes.

"We used to scale the cottonwoods together and dance in the wind. But then they, they took you somewhere far away."

"To the school in the city."

Zhedea strained to remember. "They said you were never coming back. That something happened to you."

He squeezed Zhedea's hand. "I'm here now. I won't leave you again."

He felt warm. His presence gave her a sense of quiet resolve, a peaceful finality. She had traveled long and desperately to be there. Her weariness unraveled and fell at her feet in the grass. She rested on his shoulder.

She grew suddenly stiff and pulled away.

"What's wrong?"

"My notebook…my pencils…" she stood and turned around as if she had just missed it lying on the grass and it would appear in her sight at any moment. "They're all gone, all my memories, everything I know."

The boy stood up beside her and rested a hand on her shoulder. "It's alright. You don't need them anymore. You have me now."

"How will I remember what happened to you?"

He took her hand and led her to the grove.

"What are we doing?"

He grinned. "Watch this."

He swept his elegant fingers into the air and began spinning the wind into a song. It lilted through the grove and whispered in the leaves of the trees and caught Zhedea's hair up until it flowed around them. He took her hands, and they began to dance like children in the wind, spinning and laughing. There were no fears or worries as truly nothing but this moment alone existed. Why were tears welling up, spilling down her face?

A small flame flickered inside her and singed her chest. She kept dancing. Hidden in the boy's peals of laughter were carillons cries of heavy sorrow, distant but distinct. She kept dancing, not wanting to feel the familiar weight of grief even as she understood the truth, even as flowers began blooming in his hair and his back began merging into patterns of leaves.

"Why are you crying?"

"You're not really here, are you?

Leaves of red oak and golden aspen were taken up by the wind out from his chest, and the flowers in his hair wafted outward, taking his form with them.

He stopped, looking down at his hands, covered in moss. "No," he said, quietly. "I suppose not."

"I think we have to go." She knew she had to get somewhere. She could not stay in this dream.

"Please don't make me. You asked me to be here. I don't want to exist any other way."

His grief almost broke her.

"I'm so sorry, Zhedea."

"I know," she said.

The wind kept pulling at him as he melded into autumn-colored leaves and fragile flowers that faded into ferns and softest moss. "I wanted to be real again."

A single tear rolled down his face, caught the light, glistened once, and, as all his self was taken up into the sky and into the sea, changed into a four-petaled snowdrop and drifted to the ground. She picked it up and placed it in her pocket.

The grove was empty now, but still so warm, and the sea breeze so gentle. If she could just rest for a while…

She had not noticed before that a name was scratched into her arm: *Luca.*

"Zhedea, wake up!"

She walked back into the dark.

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The hands of wandering white flesh were taking away her pain. She had called them here. She could feel the memories locked deep inside being siphoned out of her. Memories of her baby brother's death, the mysterious loss of her older brother, her mother's barren mind. She forgot how vibrant and strong and lovely Leah looked at her wedding to her father. How unlike the hollowed-out, shriveled version of her mother Leah had been charged with caring for until Anket's violent end. She lost nights of fevers and fear and forgetfulness and of a fight with another Uwetaga that left her all but broken.

She saw the dark ravine and felt the chill wind. The air smelled like death. Why did I come back here from the peaceful grove above the sea? Even as her painful recollections slid out of her, her body ached and gnawed at her spirit. All she wanted was to be empty. She wanted the release of herself being taken away, of melting into nothing in the night. Her arms fell into the cold sand. Heat began to eddy around the parts of her skin that touched the ground, searing the name scratched into her arm.

"I can't do it. I can't go yet," she whispered.

"Be at peace, we can be happy together," the Uwetaga murmured in a hushed melody.

She called upon the earth to feed her flame, the small spark barely smoldering within her. The earth answered her from below the deep lands of corrupted stone, from below the enshrouding mantle—it answered her from the ancient recesses of the fires of creation. She first felt the pulsing in her fingertips, then the heat rising in her hands, and heat swelling from her core like liquid light to meet the warmth from the center of the earth that pooled into her body. As her mind cleared, the liquid light poured out of her and formed patterns on the ground of roots and trees branching out to one another, connecting and strengthening in reflection of her resolve. She ignited.

The Uwetaga screeched as the flame struck him, attempting to burn him, refine him. His grip on Zhedea released and she half ran, half let herself be carried by the lava-light flowing through the wash. More Uwetaga had come at the sound of the first one's calls. They came as shadow-shapes, grasping for her like starved animals caged in the pockets of the ravine. Some appeared new and full of meat wearing the vibrant colors of Odan, while others, even small children, wore nothing but tattered rags of ancient flesh.

"Go away!" she screamed. "There is nothing left for you take now but fire!"

Despite her commands she still burned in the agony of communing with the fire, even still temptation rose in her with thoughts of the coolness of the sand and the Uwetaga's touch. She was nothing but a single choice now.

She scrambled out of the ravine with a strength she did not know and below her, the ravine engulfed with flames.

***

"So now she's my responsibility?" Leah demanded.

"Congratulations, she's your child now. Isn't that what you wanted? Or did you not consider that when you ran off with the husband of a dying woman?"

Leah said nothing. "I didn't run off with him. He was alone, he—"

"Spare me, Leah," Goko said. "You asked me to leave so I will."

"I thought you might be wanting to take her with you, that's all. How long is she going to be like this?"

"It's a miracle that she survived at all. She is strong—her fever broke—but I imagine her mind will never be the same again. The grip of the Uwetaga spirit on her mother got passed down to her before she died. She cannot go where I'm going so, you'll have to be the one to take care of her. You take care of her and I'll leave protection here for your little one," Goko said, indicating Leah's swollen belly.

Leah scoffed. "The Uwetaga? The Barren Mind disease, you mean, old woman."

"The miner's blood runs strong in you, eh lady?"

"Don't you dare act so snide! We would have nothing in this wasteland if it weren't for the miners. Things wouldn't be such a mess if we hadn't rebelled against the masters. You act like Anket's death was *my* fault." Leah's voice had dropped to a hiss.

"I'm glad you're considering what part you and your ancestors played in this," Goko said calmly. Steps sounded across the wooden floor and the kitchen door creaked as it swung open.

"You take care of that girl."

"Goko!" Leah cried.

There was no answer.

Zhedea listened from the warm cot, counting the wooden beams of the ceiling, and wondering who Goko and Leah and the Uwetaga were. Her mother would explain the strange visitors to her soon.

***

"Luca, what are you doing?" Zhedea called after the boy from the chicken yard. He ambled into the expanse of sand spattered with creosote, smelling thirsty and sweet after the rain. Only thirty paces out, Luca did not seem to hear her, not stopping or turning toward her.

"Luca!"

She dropped the water pail in her hands. The chickens squawked and fluttered out from it with indignation as she bolted past them, scrambled over the fence, and dashed into the swift sea of sand. She caught up to the boy, grabbing one of his shoulders. He kept walking eyes straight ahead; she whirled in front of him and held him still. He took her in at once and froze.

"Luca, talk to me! Where are you going?"

His eyes grew large and he searched her face. "I-I don't know. I thought I was doing something. I don't remember."

He squinted and pointed to the eastern edge of the town. "Look."

Zhedea turned and saw Mr. Sebastian, the old general store owner wandering in the same direction as Luca had been—north, to the mountains and the Blue Beyond. Zhedea whipped open her notebook to the last page: "*We are all barren now.*"

Zhedea looked up. Luca was walking toward the mountains again. She caught him by the hand, and he started to cry. "I'm scared, Zhedea. I don't know what I'm doing."

"It's okay, let's go home."

They entered the house and Zhedea was surprised to find Leah sitting at the kitchen table. At this time-of-day, Leah would usually be diligently at work at her mother's cobbling store.

"Leah, I think something is wrong with Luca, he was wandering off into the desert…Are you alright?"

Leah broke her vacant stare and looked up at Zhedea. "Yes! Yes, but I felt tired and I had this strange headache, so I thought I'd sit down for a little while."

"Why aren't you at work, mom?" Luca asked nervously.

"Work?" Leah rubbed her forehead. "Oh—yes! I sent a message to grandma. She knows I am resting today. I'll do some sewing here and go to the shop tomorrow."

Leah went to lay down in her room. Zhedea felt dizzy. She had a sense they had gone through this several times—neighbors wandering off, stopping Luca from going with them. The feeling could have been a coincidence. Rather than sending Luca to school, they sat and spun fibers of sheep's wool into yarn on the porch, using rocks to hold down their stacks of wool as a sharp wind whipped around them. Occasionally they would see someone walking out in the desert, like a lone ant under the stacks of thunderclouds piling over the mountains.

By evening time, Zhedea could not remember what she had been so concerned about earlier, why her body gripped the earth in fear.

In an empty grove

We hold the silver-dusk in this empty
grove; I struggle to release my mind
from itself. The still-standing Juniper trees pull dreams
out of seams of the fallen reams
of paper, listing everything forgotten.
All the trees of memory have been struck down.

Below mulch and moss and molded logs of downed
Spruce, I thrash through the needles only to find empty
thoughts and shadow-spaces. It seems I forgot
even the turn of your chin, the slant of your mind
and the way you move the light to make your rheme.
Seeing I was lost, the lark handed me a new dream.

I asked a prophet to unravel the meaning of lost dreams.
She told me let go and stumble down
into twilight stone and ream
open a lacuna of life that can never be empty,
even when a trampled mind
cannot be sated with yarrow and all the scents my sight
forgot.

I rage against my failing body to unleash everything forgotten
and peeled away like Silver Maple. I host invaders feasting on dreams,
the disease rotting me from the inside-out of body and mind
until, making ripples in the silent air, it brings me down.
My forgotten essence echoes and halts empty;
number my lost memories a ream.

My journal says I saw Screech Owls last winter in reams.
If they came to remind me of something, I tried not to forget
but I don't know what they said. The rest of the pages whisper empty
because I failed to record my dreams
before they slipped away at sundown.
Only among fallen trees can I find remnants of my mind.

The past refuses but the present still comes to mind.
I stagger by how well people carry their memories in reams,
but I will rest here and plant these cones in the downy-
soft soil, crafting something new each time I forget.
I am the sum of choices and wind in my branches, not of memories and dreams.
I exist now, rooting; the past is an illusion, though empty.

The conifer trees are broken, felled, and empty;
always silent are their underground dreams.
Yet they are continuous and cannot be forgotten.

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The last glaze of umber-red hung in a delicate balance on the boulders surrounding them, the sun poised at any moment to fall off the edge of the desert and sink under the world. Micah's garden of secrets reached from the firepit at the edge of the desert, under the mesquite trees, and to the outcropping of limestone boulders that sat nestled around the stream water running through the ravine and down from the skylands and mountains above.

Zhedea scratched patterns into the silt-sand bank by the stream, her head resting on her knees, knees tucked into her body. "You can't go. I'm never going to see you again," she said.

"You could come with me," Micah said, leaning against the still-warm boulder, his elegant fingers twisting long shards of reeds into strands for weaving. Zhedea thought his woven grass hats looked fairly ridiculous on him, but her grandmother said it was the way of their people, the old desert dwellers. Her mother said Micah's father was not lucky enough to be a foreman at the mine—his parents couldn't afford to buy him a leather hat. Micah had insisted his hats were lighter and cooler than any slick miner's hat, and besides, no cow was interest in being his hat.

"My mother won't let me go to the school. My brother went and he never came back. You know that."

A troubled look crossed Micah's face. "You know that the men from beyond the desert said some people decide to stay after they graduate so they can get better jobs than a miner. It's hard to get letters from outside the desert anyway, you know. And Leah came back. Mrs. Cartagena's daughter came back. She lets me borrow her books sometimes."

They went through this conversation many times, each time Zhedea knew her parents were worrying about the brother she could barely remember, arguing about whether Zhedea

should go to the place where she could learn more, do more, have more knowledge-power than the original miners themselves.

Now Micah was set to leave himself, and the furrowed brow didn't unfurrow under his tangled black hair. "My father says I'll be able to make a path for us out of the desert, to something better. Like Moses."

Zhedea sat with discomfort. Her mother did not read to her the words from the books of the miners. She did not have any books. She did not even go to the school in the village with Micah. Her grandmother would sit with her and teach her the old symbols and words no one in the town understood. The only reason she could read the little sticks scrawled at right angles was because her father taught her in secret. "We can't beat them, Zhedea," he would say in his workshed. "They've contorted this land into something new, something your Goko's people never saw before. We may as well join them. We may as well win at their game."

But why would anyone want to leave the desert to go somewhere dark and cold? They had lived here for thousands of years.

"I'll never see you again," Zhedea repeated, turning to her left to stare at Micah, demanding an answer with her fiery gaze.

"I'll come back," he whispered, crouching beside her. "I promise. We'll tear down the walls of the Blue Beyond. We'll take back what's ours and repair what was destroyed!"

Zhedea looked at him, poised with his reed held in the air like a weapon of power, his silly grass hat askew on his ever-unkempt hair. Micah, not usually so bold or outrageous, did have his odd moments. He was quiet, avoiding the children he knew only from school and the flaxen-haired miner's daughters who thought him so handsome before he opened his mouth to speak nonsense. He found his contentment only among his garden of secret trees and flowers from a faraway, aching land, planted in the soft earth by the stream.

He pulled out his journal from his tunic pocket, the only leather thing he owned. "Look at this," he said, flipping frantically to a page with a drawing of two mountains with a valley cloaked in trees between them. "The southern mountains and mines, the land beyond the desert to the west, the Blue Beyond to the North. And between, our land, our valley covered with great trees like it used to be, like the one above us."

"There's something else, too." He turns the page to a mess of words and straight lines etched in charcoal. "These lines track the quality of our water. Most people do not realize the reservoirs of our water supplies come from North, from the Blue Beyond, where the mining failed."

Zhedea nodded, unsure where he was leading. Only the southern mountain pass had been conquered for mining purposes, pulling out ore from the hills to the valley, but it had not worked in the North, a land they thought would be rich for the taking with its vibrant rock faces and many streams sliding down to the underground river in the valley. But the Blue Beyond held many secrets that were not meant for the miners. Goko said it was a sacred place, the source of the water.

"You've noticed that our water looks strange? Orange? Glowing?"

"Only sometimes."

"Our water doesn't come from the Southern reservoirs; it comes from the North."

Zhedea nodded, biting her lip. "Then why is mine residue in it?"

"Exactly. There shouldn't be if they are really not mining up there. But get this," he drew her attention to another page of graphs and scribbled notes. "I ran the water tests we did in school on the well-water, and it's not metal that's in the water. It is something I've never seen before. Well, in my seven years of scientific education that is."

"Did you ask anyone about it?" Zhedea said, doubting that scientific study was a subject Micah was well-versed in.

"I asked some of the adults in town, but I don't know, they just said in Odan it's normal for the well water to be strange sometimes, and they just clean it for the townspeople. But, even if they make it look clean, there might still be tiny things in the water that could make people sick. Like the ranch family near town who got so sad and confused they had to be taken away. Or the shop ladies losing their hair. The water started getting worse at the same time some people did too. I know it sounds crazy, but that's why I have to come back, Zhedea. I have to find a way to take care of this."

Zhedea tried to focus on his promise of return, despite it not being for her sake. He crouched down next to her and pressed his journal into her hands. "You have to keep watch over the water for me when I'm gone. I'll show you how to do the charts before I leave."

"I'll try," she said.

"No, promise me. Promise me that no matter what you won't forget about the water, okay?"

Zhedea nodded. "We'll fix it together." She held the book against her before she slipped it into her bag, feeling the warmth from Micah's body.

They sat higher up on the bank together, in small stones and pebbles that lined the ground before it became clay. It was an unspoken agreement between them that Zhedea would care for his garden while he was gone. She often came here when his parents would not permit him to leave his schoolwork and chores. She tended the tendrils of green budding up from the warm soil in his beds within the grass. She took hollowed out squashes and gathered water from the stream to water the exotic red and yellow flowers with waxy petals, visitors from a land that floated in the sea. Then he would come in the dusk and trim his growing mesquite

trees so they would grow tall and regal. Together they harvested the squash and the tubers spreading out from under the canopy of old mesquites and collected the juniper berries and wild onions for their mothers. At night, when they could sneak away, they would light a fire in the round stone firepit and brush their fingertips against the stars.

They would never be here like this again. Zhedea tried not to think about this. His eyes were large, catching flecks of golden light, gentle like the stag that had once drunk water across the stream from her, sharing a moment of quiet trust as he turned his gaze downward to lap from the cool oasis. The stag stood so close she could have reached out and burrowed her hands into his tawny coat. She saw herself climbing onto his back and riding away into the Blue Beyond, never to return from the set-apart lands.

She wanted to reach out and touch Micah, but that would be unspeakable. Ashamed of the idea of pressing into his personal space uninvited, she picked up a smooth, dark stone and placed it on his arm that rested over his knee. His eyes creased in a small smile. She picked up now a piece of bark and balanced it on his shoulder. Several more stones, and then fallen flower petals, blue violet, balanced between the knuckles of his long, slender fingers.

His face flashed hollow, his eyes lifeless. A black beast, a shadow-shape undulated over his chest. She could not look directly at it, only visualize it from the corner of her perception. His skin scattered white. The air, the space, her body, everything seemed to have frozen. Then the ripple of the stream water of the rocks and the color and light returned to him. The black form had vanished. She rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead like she was stroking off sweat and hoped he had not noticed. These images appeared more often throughout her day than before. She gently resumed setting sagebrush on his shoulders.

With his other hand, he took off his hat and then balanced that arm on his opposite knee. She sprinkled his hair with mesquite leaves. She moved behind him into the tall, dry

grasses and reached for more wildflowers. She tucked two asters behind each ear. Her hands brushed against the velvety softness of his temples then, and he closed his eyes.

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked.

"Please don't," he said quietly.

She ran lines of daisies up his other arm, following the lines of the veins stretching out of his thin arms, paler than hers, just briefly allowing her fingertips to graze them. She felt like they were two magnetic forces, the little black rectangles in her father's workshop, their poles turned the wrong way round, hovering his hands and her hands at a set distance from each other, but desperately trying to rotate on their axis so the ends of attraction could meet.

Sitting up on her knees, she covered the curve of his back with dried leaves and wove fairy dusters into his mat of curls by the stems. She was startled to look down and see he had moved his arms and was looking up at her, attending to her every move. She sat back down on the earth next to him and he didn't drop his gaze.

"Zhedea…"

She didn't breathe.

He reached out to her, spilling petals and pebbles. He took her hand in one of his, and with his other hand, pressed something into her palm. It was one of his faraway flowers, a winter flower, small, with three waxy-white petals set in a green crest: a snowdrop. Its touch, his touch, a gilden ember spreading warmth up her arm. They didn't need to say anything more. In her memory, it was always sunset.

***

She returned home that evening. Her mother sat at the window seat holding her baby brother and Zhedea laid down and rested her head on her mother's lap. Her mother had told her earlier Micah's family would receive money if he went to school, his mother allowed his

father to send his son to the land he came from beyond the desert so Micah's family and little siblings could have full bellies and warm clothes in the upcoming winter. And of course, so he could receive a good education.

"Is that why you sent my brother away?"

"Yes," her mother said sadly. She held her baby closer. "But never again."

Zhedea looked around their small house. It had three rooms and a kitchen but lacked anything besides a few wooden pieces of furniture and the shelves decorated with little things Zhedea and her mother had found and made. They were cold in the winter. They were hungry often. She felt guilty for not going to the school for her own family. Guiltier still that she was glad it was Micah being sent away and not her. Her guilt hardened over with hollow wooden walls and she placed it on a shelf to gather crimson cobwebs.

***

The entire universe was basked in moonlight. In the present, she was always in moonlight, she always would be in moonlight, and all the other infinities that existed outside of the moonlight folded up into a momentary flash. She shivered in the sand, in the firepit were the remnants of embers now ash-grey and cool. Despite her chill, sweat poured from her and she panted for air as her head swam. She thought she had come here for a reason. The leather journal lay on the ground beside her, and she hoisted herself onto her elbows to read the smudged pages. It was Micah's notebook. But what was it doing here? The earth tilted around her and she dropped her head to the ground. She could not remember. She had always been here, but where was she trying to go?

Around the firepit, across the stream, and against the boulders were the outlines of wither-dry plants, some illuminated in their death and some cast in shadow. A breeze knocked

a hardened and contorted flower off its dry stem with a crackle. The only things living here were the tall mesquite trees and the echoes under the earth. She wilted with the plants.

The pages of the journal were filled with charts and graphs, words in Goko's tongue, and farther back, thoughts from science annals, Micah's higher learning, scribbled in charcoal in Micah's scrawling handwriting. The letters just danced before her and she squeezed her eyes shut. When she looked up again, she knew the moon had moved. The knowledge of time passing sent a surge of urgency through her and she scrambled onto her knees, flailing to move—but to where?

She needed to get to the water in the Blue Beyond. It was her only chance of stopping the illness of the barren mind, of saving her mother. She saw Micah in her mind, wrenched into a tall and pallid creature commanded by otherworldly dictives. She pulled herself forward, not dwelling on a single thought that could distract her from her mission.

She found herself curled on the ground again. Where was she going? To the water. She needed water. She crawled toward the stream, weights hanging from her bones and under her eyes.

"Zhedea?"

She heard soft but frantic footsteps pattering through the sand and crunching in the pebbles beside the stream. Someone lifted her up and helped her scoop water into her mouth. She drank wearily.

"Oh Zhedea, oh god, I was so worried about you," her father panted in a whisper. "I was afraid you had gone where your mother went. Oh, please don't go there. Please don't."

Tears slid down her face, mixing with her sweat, but they were not her tears.

"I have to do something," she tried to explain. Her words spilled out like honey and dribbled down her mouth.

"It's okay," he said, "don't try to talk. You're burning up. We'll get you home safe. Leah is cooking soup for you and I got some medicine in town."

He lifted her up and she allowed herself to be lulled into rest in his arms. "I forgot how small I was," she said, but he couldn't understand. She had always been here, a young child in her father's arms, floating, but safe and secure. She always would be here. Everywhere else and anything else she could ever remember being faded away, a momentary flash.

***

The knife-green air of the mountain-passes carved spaces in her mind and seemed to sharpen her sight to the present. Murky thoughts of the past and future would swell through her on occasion, but for the most part, she felt rooted to the mountain, as if the ground were spreading out from her feet, the mountain itself welling out from her body. Her ears quickened to the sounds of tree-whispers and bird song and the teeming life quavering in the black soil, the mushrooms stretching out their threadlike arms to meet under the damp-wood.

When she flipped through the pages of her leather journal to search for signs of her past the charcoal images were just as smudged as the visions in her mind. Past the steps on how to take care of the animals, make meals, check the water, blurred sketches of people in her town and names of her family, past all these lists on the last page was a note: "The water comes from the Blue Beyond." How many times had she already stopped to check this? She pulled out one of her willow-thin drawing sticks and drew the symbol for water and the symbol for the North on her arms. That would be helpful, as long as she could remember what those symbols meant.

Zhedea heard a branch crack behind her and trampling footsteps. Too loud and large for an animal—she turned and saw a human form walking several yards away. She froze, her

first instinct to hide. But it wasn't one of *them*. The figure wore denim pants and a linen shirt, dirty maybe, but still kempt. His hair was long and full, and his skin was golden-brown.

"Mr. Sebastien?" she gasped. She bolted toward him, crashing through the undergrowth, and stumbling over fallen logs. The wound on her leg still throbbed. He always seemed to be the same distance away. She ran faster, catching up to him, gasping. He did not stop when she grabbed his arm. She jumped in front of him. His eyes were hollow; he did not see her. He had cuts on his feet and arms that left thin trails of blood on the leaves of the ferns as he held his pace.

She stared after him for a moment, feeling more alone than before. She noticed a weight missing from her body. She felt her chest for the leather strap. Her bag was gone. Her notebook, her food, everything. She cursed in the miner's tongue, spinning around to try to find the way that she came through the woods. She saw a patch of light through the trees and ran toward it, hoping to find the mountain pass clearing she had just been in. She did not follow the other familiar forms she saw ambling through the trees.

Nothing seemed familiar in the clearing, light cutting grey-blue shadows against the tall limestone rocks. She did not know what she had been looking for.

"Hello."

She jumped at the voice. On the smooth boulder, just above her, sat a large frog. He was green, with brown stripes leading to his nose, just under his large, black eyes, peering at her with what looked to be concern.

"You seem to be having some trouble," said the frog.

She looked around, trying to remember what she had been doing so she could deny the frog's claim. She had nothing. This talking frog could be her best chance at moving forward.

"I'm sorry, but can you help me?" she asked.

"Oh, you're a rather rude girl," he said, pulling his head back in what she thought must be a sign of offense. "You're just going to assume! The first talking animal that comes along and oh, he must be here specifically to guide you in your important quest."

"You are just going to assume that *you* are the first talking animal I've come across? For all you know, all my animals at home could talk. I could know hundreds of them," Zhedea said, hands on her hips. Though, she was quite sure none of that was true. "And you assume that I assume you can guide me when really I plan to keep heading…um…*North* regardless of what you do."

The frog looked taken aback. "Well then. It is my job, I suppose, to direct people—the people that have any sense left in them. Owl never happens to be around when he could be useful. Tell me, where should you like me to take you?"

"Well, I don't know. I have a barren mind. I'm pretty certain I need to go North."

The frog blinked. "A barren mind?"

"I can't remember anything."

"Yes, I know what it means. And that makes you the least likely candidate for saving the desert they've ever sent."

She frowned and checked the image on her arm. "I think I'm just trying to get to the water source. Or…I need to build a fire and make some drawing sticks. But I still have a lot of those in my pocket. I lost my instructions, and—oh! My entire bag of supplies."

He snorted. "You are a sorry sight. But you still seem pretty with it for having a barren mind. Most of those fools just walk straight over to where the Uwetaga are."

"I had some notes," she shrugged, sensing a compliment under his derisive remark, trying to recall if she had seen any Uwetaga.

"Out of her mind," he muttered. "What good will that do anyone?"

"What?"

"Well, I suppose I'll have to help you, for Goko's sake at any rate. Let's go, I'll take you to the water source," he said, hopping off of his perch. Zhedea took one last look around to see if she had forgotten anything and walked after the frog.

They traveled through the pass and a glade of trees where they became flickers of light dancing between the slender trunks and spiny shadows. Zhedea stopped the frog alongside a brook so she could wash and rebandage her leg, something that only caught her attention with the steadily building throb in her thigh. The swelling had gone down but she must have lost the herbs she had gathered, and she didn't have the time to sit and become acquainted with the mountain plans, to inquire after their purpose and skill, and understand how they would converse with her body.

The frog popped out of the stream with a burble and spat out river moss on a rock beside her. Zhedea stared at the slimy mass. "Pack it with this and the deep-water clay. I can't have you getting an infection and keeling over dead at this point. Spirits know I'll be the one responsible for it."

Zhedea flung water at him. "I don't think I like you very much, frog."

The frog's eyes widened. "Oh, that's what they all say before they fall in love!"

Zhedea chuckled. She winced while packing her wound. The cool of the river seeped into her leg and calmed it. From the stream on the edge of the glade, she could see trails of interweaving dirt paths over a high land of tall grass.

"We need to cross that," she said. The frog nodded. Not forty paces from where she sat a small girl with dark hair and green eyes walked quickly down one of the intercrossing paths. She stumbled and pulled herself and walked on with determination. Farther on, to the

North, a woman of similar build with greying hair and keen eyes hobbled along, often stopping to gaze around her, moving in a circle before continuing. Another woman in the distance, barefoot, with the same dark hair and green eyes and a body sinewy and rooted to the earth clutched the leather satchel hung across her chest.

"Who are they?" she asked. She knew who they were.

"Like I said, it's not the first time someone has been sent here to amend what the miners started. It seems it is not the first time they have sent you or will send you. All of you just needs to keep trying until you make it."

The frog spoke casually but he sat and watched the passing figures with Zhedea. An owl landed on the round boulder on the opposite side of the stream. Her feathers rippled in the wind, and her keen gaze flooded Zhedea with firelight.

"Oh, here we go," said the frog, rolling his eyes.

"What are you doing?" the owl screeched. "She is not the one to bring restoration! Can you not see she will only get stuck in the timeless land? Her mind will enrapture her forever!"

"What did I tell you?" said the frog, looking at Zhedea. "So dramatic." He turned to the owl. "Well, I can understand why you might have your concerns about her, Owl, but this is my job and she seemed very insistent."

Zhedea rubbed the mark on her arm just to make sure it was still there. She read the names written in the palms of her hands. *Mother, Father, Micah, Luca, me.* "I insisted," she said.

Owl ruffled her feathers. "And what makes you think you can succeed where others have failed?"

Without memory of where she came, without knowledge of where she was going, she drew closer to the fire lit inside her chest, warming her hands and face, reading the names on her hands again. She sought inside the fire for an answer. She looked up at the owl.

"I burned the Uwetaga."

"With a barren mind," noted the frog, as if pleased with himself.

The owl tilted her head, examining the girl, growing ever paler and thinner. "How did you manage that?"

"I just read Luca's name."

The frog nodded, smiling.

"Who?" the owl asked.

Zhedea sighed. "I don't remember exactly."

The frog's face fell. "What exactly can you remember?"

"Not too much. I just have a feeling that I need to keep moving forward. For those whom I love. It's very important. I'll keep going whether you help me or not. I can't be sure you're real at this point."

"Her insults aside, this one might make it, but I don't have high hopes," the owl hooted.

The frog wiggled his shoulders in something like a shrug. "The iterations of this girl seem to be our last chance. Now, come on, girl, we'll take you to some shelter for the night. After that, it'll be off to the Blue since you're so insistent."

Zhedea rose, ensuring she had tightened the loose fabric securely around her wounded leg. "The Blue?"

A gust of wind rippled around the owl's feathers and Zhedea's hair. "The place where air, water, stone, and fire meet," explained the frog, hopping forward down to the intersecting paths. "It's where you'll make things right."

The owl landed on Zhedea's shoulder and they set a pace behind the frog.

"Very well. How do I do that?"

"If you made it this far, you'll know what to do when you get there," replied the owl. "That's all we know."

Zhedea smiled. "Better than me. I can't even recall my own name at this point."

The path, twisting, curving, rolling over the hills felt fiercely familiar to her. Zhedea, the girl who didn't remember her name, felt the dark, packed earth moving up to meet her feet with each step. She began to lead the way.

***

The town sat in the lanky, desert haze, silent and motionless. Zhedea used a scarf to push the sweat from her brow as she left the butcher shop. Kino and Leah had gone baby Lucah to visit Kino's parents in the neighboring mining town. Zheda had forgotten there were other towns and people across the wide expanse of desert valley. She checked her journal, instructions for making bone broth were bookmarked on page 27. *After purchasing shank bones, turn to page 14.* Zhedea turned the pages to the town map, important shops and homes clearly indicated on the route from her home. She heard footsteps scuffing in the dirt road and she quickly stashed her journal into her bag. She still was managing to hide her condition from the rest of the world.

The miners from the first shift were walking back from the mines. Their eyes shone listlessly and their bodies covered in soot seemed to languish. None of them looked at her. Zhedea's father was lucky to be a blacksmith. They turned a corner. She scanned the dusty

street and checked her map once more. She crossed the arroyo. She always had a strange feeling when crossing the old plank bridge, but there was a new presence here. She stopped, paced back, and looked through the slats in the planks. In the shade, she saw a lump of dirt in the shape of a human. The figure coughed and a puff of dust flew up.

"Hello?"

The dirt lump lifted its head and smiled at her. "Oh, Zhedea, I was hoping you would come. I have been so hungry."

Zhedea gasped, dropping her back on the bridge. She ran to the arroyo's edge, turned, crawling and slipping down the dirt wall. "I know you," she said to the lump.

"It's me, Micah," it replied hoarsely. Zhedea paused for a moment, remembering Micah's name inscribed on the first page of her journal. She knew she could trust him, she just wasn't certain why.

She smiled hesitantly at him. "I don't think it's usual for you to be here, Micah. What are you doing?"

"Looking for you. I took a tumble into the ravine last night."

"Can you stand?"

"Sure", he coughed. "You have any water?"

"At home. It's not far" she said, noticing his frayed lips and swollen eyelids under the layers of dust. "On the other side of the bridge there's kind of a stair of rocks and boulders. I'll help you up that."

While Micah cleaned in the washroom, Zhedea had scoured her notebook, reading things she hadn't considered in months. Micah's return weighed on her as she tried to understand, to remember something that would explain why he was here. She had treated his

now-scarring wounds and stopped asking questions when they only made him tremble. He wolfed down the rice soup and water Zhedea gave him. Now clean, dressed in some of her father's old clothes, she could see his tall, emaciated body, a thin tree with dry leaves crackling in the wind.

"Your family will be happy to see you," Zhedea suggested.

Micah froze. "No. They'll find me there."

He kept eating and wouldn't say more. Zhedea knew better now than to press him. Besides, she didn't know how long she could hide the deteriorating state of her mind from him. She made him a bed of sheepskin by the kitchen stove. After she cared for the animals, she sat against the cool adobe wall across the room. The wooden beams shifted and cracked. Micah shivered even under the red wool blanket. She woke to his weeping, begging someone to leave him alone. He didn't seem quite awake, but she stroked his hair and sang him Goko's songs of the soft desert valley covered in trees.

The next morning, after he calmed, he sat on the porch wrapped in the blanket, watching the flashes of sunrise cross the reams of sand. "You can't imagine what it was like there," he said. "Worse than the masters. Worse the sicknesses. We weren't children for long there."

"Where?" Zhedea asked, absently. He stared at her. Zhedea held a hand to her mouth. "I mean…The place where you came from. Yes, it must have been awful."

"You have it now, don't you? The sickness of a barren mind?"

She nodded. "But I haven't forgotten everything. Not yet," she said, sitting down beside him. "I've been testing the water every day. And I found a path up the Blue Beyond Mountains. It's not the miner's trail, they covered that up. But I think it will lead to the source. I tried to go there once, after my mother…"

Micah hung his head and began drawing circles in the dust. Zhedea had already told him about her mother yesterday. She had been catching him up with the changes in Odan, as much as she could. "Then what happened?" he asked. His voice dissipated at the corners of the light breeze.

"I forget…well, it was dark. Years ago. It was a difficult night." She cleared her throat, trying to sound more rooted. "Look, I found maps in Goko's books, leading to some kind of lake up there," she said, pulling out her journal.

He fluttered a brief smile. "My old journal."

Zhedea looked at him with confusion but shrugged it off and flipped it open to maps, hand-drawn with exquisite detail. "I think it's the source. I couldn't make it there alone—"

She noticed he straightened a little, his thin ribs almost bursting out of her father's old linen shirt. He grasped her hand. "We could make it together."

"When you're strong, when you're ready," she nodded. "We'll find a way to restore the land. To restore ourselves."

He smiled. Sorrow danced around the corners of his lips. "It's too late for me. But if the last thing I can do is save you and those I care about, nothing will be lost."

They scaled through the blue haze that separated the desert from the distant mountain some days later. Micah stumbled behind Zhedea, his old surety on the rocky trails gone. Zhedea reached out over the ravine to the left to feel the wind press into her hand. She glanced at Micah. It wasn't the inches he'd gained on his gangly legs or the brief dusting of a mustache that made him almost unrecognizable, but the listless haze hanging over his eyes, in the air around him. Zhedea couldn't remember the fullness of their childhood together, but she could feel new weight bearing him down that had never been there before. Despite herself, she tried

to imagine what could have happened to him, what could have caused the streaks of scars she'd seen running across his back. Micah's strength had returned but he would often jolt awake, screaming in the night.

As they passed the juniper and white oak into the air of sharp cedar and pine, Micah found no refreshment. Though his steps were determined, his body dragged. Zhedea distracted herself by making notes in her journal and making marks on the trail. She would not rely on Micah to get them back, she knew.

***

The sky blackened with sharp angles of dark forms in the clouds. Rain shifted horizontally in the wind and cut through Zhedea and Micah. It felt as though the earth's foundations were rupturing through the seams that stitched the mountain range together.

"We failed," shouted Micah, holding his head in his hands, the rain plastering his dark hair around his neck.

"We can fix this," Zhedea yelled back. "We can come back and try again!"

A crack of lightning shot through the mountain valley.

"You don't even remember what happened!" Micah accused. "If I don't do something you'll be stuck here forever!"

He picked up his pack and threw it, screaming against the wind and the shaking mountain. "You don't know how lucky you are, to be able to forget everything. You know nothing and you are so damn lucky!"

Zhedea glared at him. "How dare you," she said, not loud enough to be heard over the rain. Micah understood her gaze and fell to his knees, sobbing. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he cried. "You have to get away from here."

"I won't leave you, Micah," she said, crouching down beside him.

He shook his head. "The Uwetaga. I released them. They're coming here right now. I'm so sorry. I just wanted to be at peace. I just wanted to be nothing."

He was frantic now, shaking his head back and forth, muttering to himself, then chanting. A ghostly, white figure appeared through the dark tree line, illuminating the blackness around itself. They were walking from the miner's abyss, the first mining hole that was dug in these mountains, striking the core of the earth. Zhedea steeled herself against Micah's fear, against her confusion and trembling hands, against the creatures of wandering-white flesh gliding toward them, halfway between one world and the next. She wrapped her arms around Micah. The air thrummed with wet pine.

"They can't take us, Micah. No one goes to the Uwetaga except by choice."

Micah wrenched from Zhedea's grasp, flinging himself between her and the eldritch dance. He smiled sadly at Zhedea. "I'm sorry," he called. "They came for me."

White hands encircled his neck, and the earth shook.

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Zhedea bolted up, nearly clipping her forehead against the low-hanging ceiling of the small cave. The cave pulled light in at an angle, and Zhedea could see the frog and owl sunbathing on the rock directly outside. She crawled out of the cave and rubbed at the knots in her back. The orange light of the early morning stung her eyes.

"The girl looks even worse than before she rested," commented the owl.

"What can we do?" asked the frog. "These humans are very fragile creatures."

"We found you some food," said the owl, indicated a dead mouse laying on the rock.

"I'm not hungry, but thank you," Zhedea said.

The frog rolled his eyes. "I told you she can't eat that trash. There's an oracle bush here. It's nutritious, and should help a bit with that barren mind of yours."

Zhedea nodded, gathering the orange fruits to store in her pocket. "I had some last night and I remembered my dream. My friend and I came here to fix the source…but it didn't work and he…he called for the Uwetaga."

The frog and owl looked at each other. "What a fascinating vision!" exclaimed the frog. "What do you think it means?"

Zhedea sighed. "I know it was a true vision of the past. I know I've tried this before and failed, maybe more than once. But how can I consider what went wrong and decide how better to act next time if I can't remember what happened?"

"You have us now," said the frog after a pause.

"You can turn back," offered the owl. "We can show you the way."

Zhedea shook her head. "Whatever I have left at home will be gone if I don't find a way to succeed. Let me drink from the stream and we'll be on our way."

The owl nodded. "Only a few hours walk from the source."

Zhedea felt the extent of her aching joints as she walked to the stream through the tall, yellow grasses. She lowered herself slowly, using a nearby rock to aid her crouch. The water gleamed as she cupped it in her hands and sipped it. She basked in the full feeling of the sharply cool wind brushing her hair and the water swelling inside her. She stopped in surprise when she saw her hands—leathery, gnarled, and knotted. Her hands looked like Goko's hands. Her hair was like spun-silver. She rose to head back to their small camp. She had to hurry. After all, they must have been walking for a long time already.

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Zhedea pulled her long, black hair from her face, securing it with a frayed strand of fabric from her dress. She checked the wound on her leg, ensuring no infection took hold over

the night. The frog's dark spots blended into the rock he sat upon making him look like an appendage of the boulder.

Something stuck out of the ground through the tall, yellow grass. Zhedea bent and picked up a rusted can. She touched the lid, hanging on by a thread, and its bond withered and dropped to the ground.

"We're getting closer," hooted the owl, landing on her shoulder.

They continued through the mountain valley of grass, climbing a higher mountain pass, coming through again to level ground and groves of evergreen trees. Zhedea could hear no birds singing here. The wind stilled and the trees rang silent. Rather than the crisp, invigorating air of the lower plains, the atmosphere thrummed with a magnetic pulse. The resistance to movement she so often felled enrapturing her mind became embodied. Zhedea remembered herself standing here as an old woman, as a small child, iteration after iteration, turning back at different points on this trail.

"All I know is that things are deeply wrong," she said, "and that wrong is rooted in wherever we are going."

The frog nodded. "This is usually about where we hear you turn back."

"I'm barren minded and broken. How could I possibly fix anything?"

"What takes place does not matter," said the owl. "All that matters is what you are going to do about the wrong that lays before you."

"You won't tell me what lies ahead?" She didn't know if she had asked this before.

"How can we? You can't remember. The choice is your own."

Zhedea pressed against the growing weight and thickness of the air. The trees began to thin. The sky was thickly clouded here, but bright like a sweeping monsoon sky. More tools lay scattered on the trail now widening to a road. Rusted axes with worn handles, turned grey

from the sun and rain. Old tire pieces scattered on the ground like tattered flesh. Not far from the road lay the remnants of an overturned truck, rusted to its frame. Zhedea saw a bunkhouse made of stones. The wooden roof had collapsed and given way. Dust floated visibly in rays of light shining through the shafts of roofing from a source she could not see.

A stag bounded through the fog, startling Zhedea.

"Zhedea!" The frog croaked with agitation.

She stared wide-eyed at the frog.

"Step out of the fog," said the owl, perched on the ground next to the frog. She looked down and saw a white-silk cloud draped around her waist. She stepped backward, back onto the trail, and out of the tree line.

"We've been trying to speak to you for some time now, nearly an hour," said the owl. Zhedea looked blankly at the owl, trying to pull her thoughts back up to the speed at which the owl spoke. "Well," she said, "let's keep going."

She stepped carefully, avoiding the billowing tendrils of the cloud smoothly rolling at the level of her hands. The road widened to a clearing; earth worn down by great machines. Fifty paces out, the ground gave way and a lake of silver-grey clouds stretched out above the hollow space encircled by a wide, purple sky stretched up to the heavens. Great forms, dark and sleek, surged and swelled through the lake. They cried out with echoes of sorrow that rolled up Zhedea's hands and arms and landed on her chest. When luminous vapor sprayed from their backs, the clouds would part to reveal stars in the gleaming beyond.

Zhedea felt the pulse drawing her in now. She took a step forward. The owl squeezed her shoulder with a talon. "Look down before you go farther," she said. Zhedea pulled her eyes away from the creatures, looking down to the darkness where the earth fell away. The earth did not just fall away, it had been cut away in magnificent slices, crisscrossed lines

gradually cutting farther and farther down into the heart of the mountain. They had torn the earth up at the seams. At least five kilometers across, the pines on the other side were distant specks. Zhedea found she could not follow the gaping chasm all the way down; an abyss, it fell away from visible light. The expanse of nothing was so vast all else Zhedea could conceive of seemed insignificant in comparison.

"The place where the air meets the stone and the water meets the sky," she whispered. "I heard it in a dream somewhere.

"The source of water and stone—small wonder they built the first mine here," said the owl.

"The Uwetaga were great stone spirits, guarding us against the sorrow of the deep. But the greed of the miners ravaged the mountains and the Uwetaga communed with them, losing their connection with the stone," Zhedea chanted. "…The water spirits now reside above a chasm of grief and emptiness."

The owl and the frog were speechless, offering a small hoot and croak. "I know what I have to do. I have to go down there and fill the chasm." Zhedea had thought her companions could speak before this, but she wasn't sure. "I'd better go before I forget what I'm doing—or remember."

She spied a dirt ramp stretching down into the first rung of sliced earth and began her descent. As she did this, she saw a rain-whipped boy kneeling in the mud, a bowed elderly woman walking in circles, women that looked like herself allowing themselves to be pulled back down the mountain. Uwetaga gathered around the trees. She ran down the incline of earth that circled forever down. The last thing she saw was a fury of vast wings and the lightning talons of the bird of thunder. Then the earth tilted, and her momentum pulled her

down. She ran great circles as the earth slanted until her feet ceased to touch the ground and the light shuddered away.

At first, she thought the air felt colder than it should, for being so close to the earth's core. Rather than cold though, the air simply felt empty. A dim illumination, not so much a light, emanated around her. A foul reek hung in the space. Thick tendrils of wandering flesh curled in oozing ropes, a pale copper color. The ropes sprawled out from the nest, the source of rot, death, and decay. Zhedea surveyed her hands. Hands young and old, strong and weak. Past, present, and future intertwined as one. The vines wormed around her and she realized she had always been in this place, and always would be. Anything else that might exist was just a flicker that glinted and then was lost in the emptiness. The vortex that lay in the nest of decay swallowed bits of her self that hovered around her. Each time she looked in the direction of the nest it seemed to grow as the vines outstretched and seethed, but a glance away and the nest would remain in the same place.

Soak into the nothingness. Let your existence cease to be.

She lied down, being drained of fear, worry, and the flattening exhaustion hanging on to her shoulders. The hungry nest itself, however, ached still, and empty.

"I am not the same as you," said Zhedea. "I am not nothing."

She sat up. "I am stronger than you!" she declared in the lacuna. The void swallowed her words, rendering them soundless. "I am stronger than you," she said again. "And I am going to fill this space with what was lost."

In the dim-dark, she began to build a fire, pulling tinder and kindling from her hair and gathering sapwood from her bones. She summoned heat from her hands and blew her last breath of air. An ember began to glow in the seat of darkness. As the spark billowed into a flame, not even the vortex could consume it.

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Zhedea gathered her basket, coin purse, and wrapped her deep-red scarf around her shoulders. Kino, Leah, and Luca would be home soon, and she needed to fill the icebox and replenish the grain for the animals. In the sunlight, her head felt like bursting from the inside. She had been in the dark for so long the sudden burst became too much. She walked through past the mesquite and over the arroyo bridge with her scarf wrapped over her head. The road into town was busy with cars. She smiled at the familiar sound of the horns beeping, radio playing. Someone had the radio on near the town center, featuring a throaty vocalist and frolicking violins backed by trumpets. Children played near the fountain, alight with glimmering water. The ranchers and a few townspeople bartered at the market stands. Zhedea looked at the sky. The air from the north was heavy and the sky replete with black, clamoring clouds.

Zhedea stepped into the general store and the satisfying sound of the bell pealed as the door opened. Mr. Sebastien smiled from his granite counter, white sleeves neatly rolled past his elbows, black ponytail draped over one shoulder.

"Zhedea," he said, "good to see you."

Joe, his teenage son and store hand, waved from the back, flashing a grin. Zhedea paused a moment before waving back. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Had a little too much sun?" Mr. Sebastien asked.

Zhedea shook her head. "No, sorry—I just wasn't expecting to see you here."

Mr. Sebastien laughed. "Sorry kid, I'm not going anywhere. What can I do for you today? Need Joe to send your next order of feed over?"

Zhedea went through her list and Mr. Sebastien began packaging her purchases in brown paper. She absently went to the paper stand and began reading the headlines: "Localized

mountain earthquake—dams broken. Land polluted—repatriation team comes to Odan. Forced labor at boarding schools."

"It's just awful isn't it?" Mr. Sebastien said, shaking his head. "The masters gone and yet their descendants are still finding ways to get free labor out of us. I sure hope that investigation proves to be honest and thorough."

He gestured at Joe behind him. "He's got a sister missing out there. I can't imagine how hard it must be for you and your dad."

"My older brother," Zhedea said, as if his broad, kind face hadn't crossed her mind in a long time.

"You sure you're okay, Zhedea?" Joe asked, appearing behind her with a sack of grain.

She smiled. "Yeah, I think so. I think I'm great."

She gathered her packages in her basket, thanked them, and left, telling Joe to have his team leave the grain in the usual spot. Not just Mr. Sebastien, but several missing people appeared at their usual stations. Those who had been physically ill were now haggling at the market or playing with their children. Whatever she did this time, the last time, the first time she crossed the Blue Beyond, it had worked. She laughed in relief and burst toward her home.

A young man sat in the shade of her porch on the old wooden steps. She paused before walking toward him again, praying for her brother to be safe at home. It was Micah, older than she remembered him, his golden-brown skin a pasty white. His eyes listless and dull. She knelt beside him, feeling his forehead covered in sweat. It was cold. He slowly met her gaze.

"Why…did you do it?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"You took away…my peace. Now I remember everything. I feel everything. There's no more rest for me," he said in a chanting voice. "I didn't exist and then I woke up to something like a knife stabbed straight through my chest."

Zhedea dropped to the steps and wrapped her arms around Micah as he wept. "You existed more than you knew."

She gently opened his palm, pulling a single snowdrop from her pocket, she placed it in his long, elegant hands.

Kino, Leah, and Luca drove in from the dirt road. Luca grinned, waved, and shouted her name. Her father lifted a hand in greeting. Leah smiled.

"I didn't want to come back," Micah said. He shuddered as Zhedea stroked his shoulders. The clouds piled over them, casting a shadow of soft relief over the expectant sky. The monsoon broke open and raindrops began to fall. The new water splashed and sizzled, making little craters in the warm sand before they were swept away in the rain.

Recycle

Nothing exists without your perception—
Idle *fairy dusters* glisten on this plane.

Between the idle *fairy dusters*, whispering on this plane,
The ground begs you breathe into the loam.

The ground begs you breathe into the loam;
Change the colors from grey to sorrel-brown.

Reorder the light-pattern petals to amber-brown,
In the waxy petals all time exists together.

Knit the waxy petals of time together.
I recycle my pain to use as a flower vase

Save your pain for later for a flower vase,
Careful not to let the *acacia* prick your fingers.

The *acacia* thorns bloody your fingers.
Nothing exists without your perception.

Revision

i. high thrones of peddling kings
false knowledge of the heavens
crawling under the midnight sun
twisting out the cloths
of blood
draping fabric carefully
to find the threads
of our being

ii. there's no shame in fearing the dark
what you do not know
might slant you
asunder
if you pin and
gather
more fibers
you might find a dewdrop answer
or you might
lose yourself
in the folds

iii. let me pluck out these misplaced threads
pouring out liquid light
patterns on the cloth
and on the ground
tendrils
shoots and roots
perhaps there is no need
to know the origin of these strands
if you know
how to loom them
we rewrite the past
for the sake
of the future
and chart our own map
on the fibers of this weave

Artist's Statement

Although my understanding of art, and specifically my own writing, is continuously developing, I believe the importance of the writer and their responsibility to their audience is to provide an outlet for the acknowledgement of chaos and confusion. To find ways not necessarily to make sense of these elements, but to reveal light, truth, determination, or even a mode of endurance through the oft-painful gravity that is this life, the weight of which so often wavers dangerously between strengthening us or crushing us.

It is my hope to offer lenses to both sense and to comprehend the world in a new way. To do this one must be willing to attempt to unravel confusion, to recognize the existence of things one does not yet understand and may never understand, to sit in the shadow of abstraction and find perhaps not an answer to a question, but a fuller understanding of oneself. I believe the most excellent artists are those who favor an uncommon way of looking at the world, a strange awareness of the ordinary, but make them relatable enough to feel familiar to the audience. The true artist awakens ideas within the audience that already existed but were not given the time or place to be realized before.

The foundation of my thesis first developed from a combination of a fascination with the world of neuroscience and a rare neuroinfectious disease I acquired as a teenager. Despite experiencing ongoing life-threatening symptoms and abject memory loss, I constantly found the impetus, strength, and drive to move forward and make choice toward a higher good. When I began studying neuroscience in school, the molecular explanation of identity seemed highly limited, lacking in an explanation for my ability to continue during a long period of illness, and the experience of others, in even more brutal conditions. I concluded identity must be based on choices, on the way someone chooses to be moment by moment, regardless of knowledge of the past. While the origin of things like consciousness, will, and identity, are still

unanswered questions when trying to unite these concepts with the biological world, my greater understanding and communal experience trauma, neurological damage, mental illness, and my own experience of encephalitis later in life challenged this hypothesis. This development of ideas is reflected in my poetry and stories, skills for which I have had the opportunity to develop through literature courses, fiction and poetry workshops, and conversations with my advisor and former writing instructors.

In this work, I do not seek to provide definitive answers to questions of identity and the impetus for resilience and recovery or presenting a series of arguments against materialist neuroscientist (who, in my opinion, do great work despite my qualms with their conclusions). Rather, I hope to invite consideration of the complexity of the human brain, its beautiful fragility in the face of illness, trauma, or damage, and questions of how much it does, or does not, originate and influence human identity.

Brute force

This piece was inspired by work at International Rescue Committee. Many asylees and refugees are victims of violent war crimes and have neurological damage in addition to PTSD and poor psychological health. Due to the nature of government subsidized housing, they are placed in homes and apartments where the owners make a profit by offering subsidized housing in dangerous and dilapidated parts of town. Mold and other environmental dangers can run rampant in these homes, which are known to increase neurological and physical health problems but are not often caught by sleep-deprived resident physicians in a 15-minute appointment. Because many traumatic brain injuries and acquired brain injuries affect tissue at the microscopic level, they cannot be picked up by standard testing procedures and someone's brain damage is written off as purely a psychological problem. Despite the many mental and behavioral health challenges experienced due to their experiences, the burdens of

physiological and neurological trauma compound these issues with little relief to be found in the stresses of coming to a new country, already burdened with debt—assistance from the government that must be repaid.

Barren Mind

While writing "Barren Mind", my central focus was the belief that from here, one can begin to tease out a new perception of identity: although memories may inform who we are, it is our choices that inform our memories, inform our character, and inform our actions. Our choices from moment to moment determine who we are. In studying the Bodewadmi language with Prairie Band elder Donald Perrot, I have gleaned this concept from the Neshnabé (Algonquian people from the Great Lakes region) perspective that reveals an identity formed by one's actions, one's choice to either properly maintain their inner fire by following the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (seven moral guidelines to live by) to the best of one's ability and by doing good in the community or succumbing to darkness. In Neshnabé culture, children are often asked, "how is your fire burning?", rather than, "how are you?". This is meant as an opportunity to consider one's actions and how one is choosing to live and treat others. The theme of the inner fire presents many times in my piece "Barren Mind", in which the main character does not have reliable access to her memories but is still presented with choices about who she chooses to be from moment to moment. The antithesis to an identity made up of the choices to strengthen your inner fire, the terror of Algonquian legend, the Wiindiigo, is represented in the story, known here as the Uwetaga. Although popular culture has morphed this figure into a human-eating monster, this creature was originally meant to be the human embodiment of one who chooses to give themselves up entirely to darkness.

As a Haida and Tlingit citizen of the Eagle Frog house, I am familiar with the Gaagiixid, a creature embodying the mental turmoil that pushes one over the edge, who also provides inspiration for the Uwetaga. In the case of the Gaagiixid, despair consumes one as they follow the path into darkness, and only the united community can bring the Gaagiixid back to their original humanity. In Haida culture, the world is often referred to as being "as sharp as the edge of a knife", making it easy for one to fall off, echoing the Judeo-Christian concept warning one to not stray from the narrow path. These cultural concepts give these First Nations people a foundation to understand who they are. Without memory of the past or knowledge of the future, one can confidently act on an identity informed by the choices made toward strengthening their inner fire, or striving to treat oneself and others with respect, or to act contrary to these goals. One can even choose to rewrite the meaning of what memories they do have, to find ways to learn and grow from them, or in the instances of trauma, find ways to overcome them.

Leslie Marmon Silko's literary technique of using a non-linear narrative as in her novel *Ceremony* greatly influenced the story "Barren Mind", as well. In Silko's book, Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit, she writes, "For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web-with many little threads radiating from the center, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made". While Silko uses this to hearken to the Pueblo expression and to imitate the crisscrossing pattern of Thought-Woman's dance, as a literary technique I found it could be used to either clarify or to disorient, to obfuscate relevant information or bring attention to it. In this way, it allows the reader to share the experience of a character struggling with mental illness, trauma,

memory loss, or all the above, as well as being a way to move to a new time or space through a key, symbolic connection within the environment or the character's mind.

Through this story, however, a new question arose that shaped my conclusion about identity. The character Micah, who experiences a great deal of trauma makes the "wrong" choices and succumbs to the Uwetaga. There are many circumstances where people repeatedly choose the wrong path, are ravaged by physical and psychological traumas, and give up on themselves and their community. Additionally, there are those whose cognitive capacities are so far beyond simple memory loss, they are incapable of making choices whatsoever, be it due to trauma or illness. While these types of trauma make it difficult to develop and fulfill one's identity, forging a personal identity and having a continuous identity as a fundamentally valuable human life are two separate matters. The story ends on a heavy note for Micah despite Zhedea's victory, as a reminder that identity and the self are not as simply as making the right choices when someone's ability to act and choose are deeply impaired. Yet, there are many instances of miraculous recovery, through human will, through community labors of love, and through the natural process of healing that occurs with time—a reason why First Nations people suffered even more greatly during times of illness, abuse, and addiction when their healing ceremonies and community practices were banned. Ceremonial healing practices work to repair the identities of communities, and, in circumstances where it is possible, healing of the individual is required on a mental, physical, emotional, and even spiritual to rebalance oneself to be able to follow the path of forging one's identity through choices. Regardless of whether this is possible, or whether it will take decades for science and medicine to reach the point where conditions such as Alzheimer's to be reversed, I must maintain the position that it is vital consider the basis of identity as being the underlying value of life before all other facets are considered or explored.