

## The Landing

I've landed in a field used to grow plants. It's more beautiful than their gardens. The uniformity of it feels like a monument to something strong. My limbs curl in the dirt, and I'm careful not to disrupt their creation. I'm waiting for the authorities to receive me. This is my defining moment—the type of moment where there's a before and after. The present time is so important, I can't help but connect it to the rest of my life; I hate it because I get stuck in my head. I stand here, on a foreign world, my body dissolving the soil into a gassy hiss of sulfur and ammonia. But all I can imagine is lying in that grief gap between life and death while memories play back the insects and the waiting. Maybe in that blip, I'll realize some significance that must elude me now.

I've spent so much time in the befores and afters, I've realized the present isn't about my senses. When I use them, they pull me backward, even if only by a millisecond. When I plug them, my memory pulls me even further back. And when I think I can't escape my fantasies and inaccurate predictions. For me, the present is not a state, but the lack of those systems, and therefore never truly there.

I expected my nature to collide with theirs, but it isn't. The familiar gases blend nicely with their quiet nighttimes. In past travels, such mixtures beautifully contrasted, like two pieces of different puzzles that fit together for some unknown and amusing reason. But here, it all fits too well, and I struggle to remember which elements are odd, and which are home.

I think the best way to tour is when you inject yourself in the environment, pretending to be an element of a system. Then leave when you're satisfied. Choosing not to disguise yourself forces the parts of the system to adapt around you, changing what attracted you in the first place. In some worlds, we've taken off the disguise and stayed, ensuing the more natural sequences of evolution. I can't help but feel like we're getting tricked by human-controlled bugs and dew. What should we tour if it already feels like home?

The faint humming of the engine sounds like the insects of the field. I can't tell which I like better. My body is oozing its typical water. But it's across the metal box of their vehicle. I'm practicing preemptive embarrassment for when they open the container. Why am I already trying to mimic human feelings? The box unfolded its outer layer into a small room, also all metal. I feel like I'm underground, something about my membrane cracking from the dry air, like it's ventilated.

They are trying to communicate with me; It's all in vain. There is only one way. My moment is coming. I'm trying to pray to my beautiful Ttuta, but can only think of their Gods. What a sick joke. I can't imagine it, but I know they'll forget me. My sisters and their lovers will burn the plants over my grave and chip away my statue, leaving only rocks, dirt, and tears. I need to be appreciative of being mourned away into nothing. Not many of us have done something monumental enough to allow for erasure. Their weeping will evaporate and fill the clouds to

mask my existence. But it's not a metaphor. Next time it rains, they won't think of the connection; They'll just enjoy the moisture.

Languages will take too long to learn, whether it's theirs, ours, or a new one. My body will decompose into a bubbling glue of chemical reactions, likely burning through the metal of this room. They'll test it, analyze it, talk about it, and then stare at it, but it'll all be useless. In time, one of their species will touch me, and my memory will seep through their pores, into their spinal cord, and brain. Awareness will pour over them. They'll try and translate it to words, but they'll cry in frustration. *"Is it a transcript or message? The ramblings of a consciousness or a diary?"* They'll feel these thoughts, so I'll think directly to you:

I'm supposed to tell you we want to live among humans, that we want to tour your beauty and terror. I now realize such an arrangement is no longer possible. You're too beautiful for your own good. We'd inevitably try to mimic you, but part of your beauty is your sensitivity. No matter how much we'd try to adapt to you, you'd adapt to us. And your beauty is too great for us to want to destroy it. But if it was destroyed, we'd likely kill you all out of blind anger -- for taking what we loved from us.

The arrangement is voluntary, but I fear you will not believe this. I fear you will accept the offer out of some delusion of retribution or uncontrollable alien lust. This would be a mischaracterization. While we'd be drawn to the stoic nature of rejection, it would only make you all the more beautiful. Our lust would be tamed by the belief that one must respect the free will of what they love.

I can't hate you for your fear. It's too deep in your brain to reject it. It's okay. If your feelings say no to my thoughts, there is another way. You'd leave. My people would arrange another world for you, plentiful and catered to your psyche. Humanity's existence would likely be lengthened. And we'd move in. We'd try and cry on your trains back to your bedrooms. We'd have marriages, and eat bread-rice. We ask, when people kill themselves off bridges, do they momentarily feel like skydivers? It might seem odd to be attracted to your beauty but then accept your departure. We are mature enough to know what we can't have. We'll use your fingerprints to feel you. If you are less fearful of this option, take it. Do not accept cohabitation. A second member of my species will arrive. She'll need the brain of someone who has touched my remains to carry your message back.

My moment finished, the process has begun! Thank you Ttuta for the time I won't have. I'll never really know what nothing is, but I just know it fits me well. I hope one day even you may fade away. It's not fair you burden our remembrance.

Please don't chase my ghost.  
He forgot to eat breakfast.  
When you chip away my statue.  
Please do it callously.

The grayish pile of sludge sat in a circle as it began corroding the floor. A drop of the substance was slightly lighter. It kept bumping against the outside of the circle, as if trying to break free. It kept desperately trying, but its color was fading and will tiring. Out of breath and muscle, it gave up, completing the perfect puddle.

## **The Leaving**

"There is a man who dreams of being in the circus. Working in a steel factory, he saves up to buy orange makeup and a cat costume. He is successful and plays in stadiums. He always imagined seeing smiling children, but there are too many; they look like dots. He learns to hear the praise instead. But his family makes fun of him, and the autographs don't cut it. He wants to kill himself and decides to hop the fence at the zoo. He stood there next to a tiger, eyes closed, listening for her fangs. But the tiger was silent in her smile. When the man opened his eyes, the tiger had jumped the fence herself. She knew there was only space for one."

"There's no way that's the real story," Susie said excitedly.

Mark replied, "I made some slight changes for your taste."

"Mom and Dad never would've allowed that," Susie said.

"Good thing they're dead then." Susie giggled.

"Now go to bed." As Mark creaked the door closed, Susie muffled through her pillow, "Wait. What time do the soldiers get here to go to the collection point?"

"7:00 AM."

"Then how many days till the departure date?"

"38."

"And how long till we get to the planet?"

Mark sighed, "They won't tell us, so probably longer than we'll be alive."

Susie spoke apologetically, "Oh, right, I guess I just wanted to hear you say it again."

"Can I leave now?" Mark said.

"I heard a rumor there are aliens. That it's not the military who made the ships," Susie said.

"Why would aliens give us the ships?" Mark replied.

"I don't know, that's just what I heard. Maybe they asked if we could leave because they want us to be closer to them."

"The Earth is dying, and we can't adapt fast enough. Nothing about aliens."

That night, Susie tried to make herself dream of what the aliens would look like. But the trying just made her daydream. She pictured a human, and then removed bits and pieces until it felt right, but it never did. She tried picturing nothing and adding parts, but she always ended up with something like a human. Susie was frustrated but had an idea. She went to the kitchen and grabbed a knife. In bed, she began placing the blade along her neck and the tip against her chest. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine an alien holding the knife, that it was trying to kill her, and she needed to picture it to save herself. The feel of the knife only took her out of daydreaming, letting her fall asleep.

The next morning, Mark went to wake Susie. Her hand gently held the knife under the covers. Mark decided to join her and moved to lie down on the pull-out couch. As Susie felt his cold skin, her mind imagined an alien. She never pictured it, but could feel something new in her. She stuck the knife in her brother's throat.

Susie looked out the window of the kitchen and saw birds jumping from branch to branch, shaking the flowers down to the ground. She looked at the windowsill and saw a fly turned over on its back. The wings buzzed, causing it to spin helplessly. It was dying, but it wasn't dead. The soldiers would be there soon, but when Susie looked around, something felt incomplete. Not because there was a lack, but a potential for more. She decided to stay and hid in the rubber of her tire swing, waiting.

### **The Makeover\***

***\*500 pounds of wet membrane wrapped in tight plastic, a real waxed look. 7 clipped and craggily limbs (stickish. Originally, 20ft. Now 6ft.) Metal vocal box; looks like a cheese grater. Feels confident in the new body.***

### **carlos and more carlos**

Carlos fed a pizza through a machine that identified its chemical structure and converted it into a series of brief, colorful flashes. She and her husband stared into the light and smiled.

"Carlos, do you ever wonder what it tasted like for them?" he said.

"Stop. I don't because I can't think of senses I don't have. Not really. Never ask that again. It undermines the mentality of our conversions.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You should be."

There was a long silence until he spoke. "Do you ever try to spot our home in thei— I mean, the night?"

"You know you can't see it from here. Just eat your food."

He erupted, "Stop using their words! I can't eat. At least say, *look!*"

Expecting Carlos to yell back, he froze in unease. But she remained composed, speaking gently through the staticky vocal box: "Let's go on a trip."

"Where? Why?"

"The beach. It'll do us some good."

Later that month, they went on their beach vacation. They laid on beach towels with their names written on the bottoms in cursive: *Carlos* and *Carlos*. One embraced the sun, the other hid from it. Worried the sand would get in his body and destroy him, Carlos began nervously scraping one of his limbs. His wife went over to soothe him.

The soothing turned erotic, and they decided to walk up the beach to their cottage. They haven't made love since their conversions. But not because they didn't want to. In their own unique way, the shared self-restraint created its own sweetness. But it was time, and they began touching. It was supposed to be beautiful, but when they were both close to orgasm, their minds rebelled against their senses. It began feeling like they were having sex with themselves. Masturbation was deeply frowned upon. The act itself was illegal. But the psychological aspects were more important. There was an oral history of likening it to vermin eating their own tails until the species died. The love was taking that circular, bitter form. A bitterness that was self-loathing, egotistical, and selfish.

They decided to kill themselves. Carlos prayed toward Ttua to forever remember them for their sin. His wife prepared electrical wires to short-circuit their systems. Right before they inserted the wires, she noticed the hardened alcoholic polymer that covered her husband was chipped from his scratching at the beach. For the first time on Earth, she saw his true membrane, gleaming in its milky white around the substance meant to represent human skin. In that moment, she couldn't remember his pre-human name, but knew their love to be the same bright thing as when they first felt it. Since their story, it has been illegal for two to assume the same human identity, and discouraged to assume any past person at all.

### **the locker and the bully**

Bryce was beating Liam up on the playground. His limbs swirled toward him in a frenzy of violence. Liam lay there motionless, the wood chips flew around like shrapnel. They were of equal strength and build, but Liam was the one who got beat for existing. When the bell rang,

Bryce stomped on him once more and moved to the classroom. Liam smiled in the dirt and chips.

The next day, Liam wanted to really get a beating, so he decided to put garbage through the cracks in Bryce's locker. When Bryce opened it, everyone laughed at him. He knew it was Liam. When the last bell rang, he spotted him casually waiting among some concrete.

Before Bryce could strike, Liam asked, "Would you want to live as long as humans?"

Bryce was confused, and his curiosity barely exceeded his responsibility for violence. "What do you mean?"

"Someone told me there was a creature like us, who had the stuff we have, but lived longer."

"Like an alien?"

"I don't know. Maybe something extinct. They said they lived like 70 years."

"Nothing dominant lives that long. They'd do something important enough for erasure before getting that old," Bryce said.

There was a contemplative silence until Bryce continued: "Liam?"

"Yes?"

"Am I a good bully?"

"Why do you ask?"

"If I was a good bully, you wouldn't be talking like this. You'd be more scared."

"You're a good bully Bryce, better than I am the bullied. I just have other roles I think about."

"What roles?"

"Ya know, my Dad says we're not from Earth," replied Liam.

Overwhelmed, Bryce began beating.

Liam sat in the principal's office.

"You're not entirely wrong, Liam," The principal said.

"A long, long time ago, our ancestors technically came from other worlds. But we would not consider such distant genetic predecessors our past relatives in any real sense." Liam sat there, gleefully taking in the information.

"How distant?" Liam asked.

"80 years."

The principal got up from his chair and approached Liam.

"You and Bryce have good roles established. It would be a shame to ruin that."

Liam shyly nodded and rose from the floor. As he was walking out, the principal noticed he dropped a crumbled scrap of paper.

"Liam, hold up." The principal bent down and opened the paper.

In scabbly writing, it read:

*Demon please don't be red*

*Don't ruin my favorite color*

*I need it for my markers.*

Liam's body swelled, stressing his polymer coating. Trembling with tears, he said, "I don't want to go to the red lake."

## **The Red Lake**

### **sisters**

"Why do you think I love you?"

"You tell me."

"Well, I think it's built into me. Like my fear of gas and snakes. But I don't know why some things are built good and others bad."

"Am I good or bad?"

"You're pretty bad, like a 3/10."

"Oh, right, thanks."

They hiked through a narrow, green valley for two hours until they resumed:

"You said why you love, but not why you love me."

"I wish I loved you for what I thought of you, and you of me, pray for it every day. Sometimes it feels like we're all moving around with the same pieces of us gone. Like Ttuta already forgot a part of us. Other times, I swear we've been spliced with whatever he had lying around, and dumped on Earth because it was easy. I, I think you give me a sort of fullness. Not like I'm selfish, or want to be selfish, I just, I don't know. You know how when you were younger and sad, your parents would ask why you're sad, like you'd somehow have a better idea as a child than an adult?"

"Sure."

"That always made me uncomfortable, like putting me on the spot, even though they just wanted to help."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"Well, when I'm sad and near you, you don't ask me. It doesn't even look like you care."

"I ca—"

"I know you do. But when you accept my state, I start mumbling, and then chatting. Eventually, I'm talking. My sadness isn't fixed or explained. But then you start paying attention to me. Looking at my limbs and skin, something in me feels connected. It feels like you take parts of the world and stuff them wherever I have empty space. I still feel sutured together, but I feel alive because I'm using the world around me, and it's using me. It's not a natural fit, but it works well."

"For the world being so unnatural, you love the mountains."

"Built in, or stuffed in, it all feels the same to me."

### **who's playing who here??**

The mountains were smoothed out by the pine trees. They were so packed and tall that if one came shooting down from the sky, they would think that dirt doesn't exist. But the sisters knew. Their limbs injected deep into the Earth, breaking any rocks that came in their way. They enjoyed the apparent uniformity of the landscape because it forced them to look closer for differences. The mosquitoes landed on their plastic skin, but soon flew off, not knowing what to bite. The valley began curving into a small basin. Along the shaley coast stood an exception to the pines. A weeping willow gently blew, its leaves dipping in and out of the water.

The sisters approached the tree. Hiding in the shade, slept an old woman. Her wrinkles had wrinkles and she curled her spine in fetal position. She slept tired, mouth open. One of the

sisters' limbs struck a large rock under the shale, cracking it and shaking the ground. Susie woke.

She thought her dying brain finally reached her mind. But she was wrong. The 500-pound spider-like hunks of plastic were idled. Their bodies delicately swayed up and down atop their dirt-covered limbs. It was impossible to tell if they looked at her. Susie rose. Her eyes gleamed with a longing fright and wetness. But the swaying of the creatures soothed her, like a baby being rocked away from tears. She used to dream of this moment before she gave up her imaginations. Four decades of dreaming and three more wishing she boarded the ship. She remembered wanting to blame them for her brother's death. That seemed silly now. Bitter and silly.

The sisters thought her wrinkles were burn marks of shriveled plastic. They all spoke the same language but never knew it. One of the sisters approached her. The tip of one of her limbs calmly scraped against Susie's skin. She noticed it didn't easily peel off to expose a membrane. The skin seemed tough and supple to the sisters. They stared at Susie and thought, "*Was she a prophet from Ttua? A mimicry of their bodies? No.*" They all wept in their own fashion. Susie cried like a mother finding her children. "*She was the common ancestor,*" the creatures thought. One sister left. The other stepped into the basin. She looked at the water beautifully distorting her features. "*Where did it all go wrong?*" she thought. Then she killed herself for Susie's body. Her membrane's red-dyed water slowly crept through the basin, filling it for Susie to drink.

### **rocks and friendship**

There's a story that our brothers and sisters who inhabited Earth found a human. The apex species before they arrived. It's said that our Ttuta and their God met on a moon that was created when they set limb, and vanished when they left. Ttuta brought nothing, and their God brought all the knowledge he let humans learn. Their God pointed to the knowledge and told Ttuta that human violence will soon erase itself, that the two species can coexist. Ttuta then ingested a rock from the moon. He told their God, "When we leave this moon and it disappears, the rock will also disappear, and therefore the part of me I hold most dear." They sat there for a full millennium. Then, in solidarity, their God ate a rock, and branded it as his soul. When they left the moon, they never saw each other again, but they thought of each other's lost parts. They wanted both species to think of those same empty holes. But, restricted to sight and sense, we needed a bridge. So a human would remain on Earth, and when our brothers and sisters saw her, they killed themselves out of disgust. For the first time, they saw the holes they put in themselves. But the human, only seeing their beauty, was flattered by their impersonation of her. Their remains seeped into the planet's mantle and created mountains to bury the human, exposing her beautiful need for remembrance.