

COMMUNION WITH YOUR ANCESTORS

1

Down in the bottom, the hairs are old, twisted in the dry lather like something living, suddenly stilled, like viruses pressed between the slide and lens or the empty forms of children at play in dead Pompeii.

He lifts the shaving mug, feels its heaviness, listens to its dry soap rattle in the bottom with his great-grandfather's hairs, rubs where his rough fingers touched the mug handle, breathes in the clean scent that covered his face, pulling loose a single hair and holding it, palm up-- raising this tiny fragment of the beard he hasn't rubbed against since 1969 when he was four and his grandfather was just a scratchy kiss and the heavy sting of pipe smoke. He is trying to pry some secret from the DNA, like meat from an old walnut.

He has reached an impassable place high up, too high to come back down, and being hungry, he grasps at this mug, these few hairs to sustain movement, to tie in to some known element solid enough to support the continued ascent. He needs the kind of strength that comes from seeing the long trailing guide-line someone else trusted long before him, someone who has left, like a string of provisions, small bits and pieces of himself, hidden at points along the way.

2

Sitting forehead to knee, I press what will become a large red birthmark of a spot just above my closed left eye. The shower whispers to my scalp as I trail thin cords of water that gather on my nose and chin, eyeing their columns into the pool I form with my body, myself the walls, water climbing toward my nipples. I drown the known to give life to this mirror I hug. It is a ceremonial cleansing I retreat to with other young men I have never really known, all arranged in long procession in my mind-- my father, grandfather, great grandfather, and so on into imagined genealogies, each one, in this moment, a reflection of the others all peering into the same clear pool cupped between clasped legs.

I have forgotten soap until the water goes cold. I pull to my feet, grabbing, gasping, maneuvering the slick bar over my body to rinse as my heart quickens and my skin pimples, tiny bumps bristling the hairs, catching my breath, then: off.

There is a stillness, my mirror, now only a drip tapping the tile beside my foot. A draft lifts the curtain, sticking it to my shins, stinging my ankles like something raw from having been opened up, peeled back. I will put on more than clothing when I go to see my grandfather this afternoon and will still be cold. After supper, we will stand in the back yard, eyes never quite meeting, carefully passing short phrases like our common blood gives us a dangerous kind of knowledge.