

“Paprika”
4,700 words
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When I open the door to let in the cool air before the sun rises, he’s standing there, his back to me. The scar along his shirtless back catches the lantern light, the raised purple shining and tapering like a candle.

A candle is made to become entirely flame; in that annihilating moment, it has no shadow.

My brother turns. At the sight of his face, the flash of metal in his hands—the lantern slips out of my hand and bursts into flame between us.

The kerosene burns in the dirt before the house. In his hands is not a knife, but a bicycle, which he wheels around the dying fire, his stiff leg scratching the dust beside the pedal.

I step into the street. He rolls the bicycle through the darkened doorway, the spokes clicking. The sky is the crushing blue before dawn.

I sense his eyes from inside the house, watching the outline of my sandal nudge the glass into a pile. The husk of the lantern is too hot to touch. He speaks:

*“break the wineglass,
and fall toward the glassblower’s breath.”*

Eight years since I last heard his rusted voice, since I left him in the mountains and returned to our childhood house by the sea. Eight years and still he extracts lines from Rumi, covering this darkness between us with the poet’s incandescence.

I answer in kind, playing on his words.

*“Inhaling and exhaling is from the spirit,
now angry, now peaceful.”*

The lantern’s handle has cooled enough to grasp. He stands still. Shards of glass in one hand, busted lantern in the other, I move inside, past his outline and the shadow of the bike leaning against the wall. The smell of the sea follows me into the kitchen, cutting through the flannel light and the heavy smell of last night’s tea. I put on the kettle.

In the war, when shells no longer whispered from the ocean but shrieked from the sky, he’d throw off our blanket late and brew his tea in the kettle, drinking it, scalding, out of the spout as we scuttled through the trench. He handed me the last three-quarters of a cup once we’d reached the guns. Knew I wouldn’t mind the dregs.

The cups, sugar, teapot rattle on the tray as I carry them in. I slide the sugar bowl towards him.

*“Dissolver of sugar, dissolve me,
if this is the time.”*

The shadow that is his head rises.

*“I am a plantation of sugarcane, and at the same time
I’m eating the sweetness.”*

As he speaks, he sifts three spoonfuls into the tea.

He became an apparition in the months we spent in the trench. Like a spider, he seemed to jump and land and still hang, suspended, and the bullets and mortar couldn’t find him. I ate, shot, and defecated with earth on all sides and thought only of killing and dirt, not minding the many shadows that flitted across that canal of sky, until his feet touched the ground beside me. Then he would whisper what he’d seen near the enemy trench. I’d look up at his tilted head and feel his hand on my helmet.

The only other time he became solid was when I awoke at dawn, next to him under grandmother's blanket, and I had to shake him to get him up and brewing his tea straight in the kettle so he could come hold the front for another day. But once he'd risen and started the tea, he was our company's idol, our hero. A strange idol, nearly mechanical, but he led us through that tunnel of days and rain and dirt.

The tide of light in the room rises imperceptibly while my brother gulps down two cups of tea. I realize he's cold and toss the blanket in his lap. He unfurls it with his fingers and wraps it around his shoulders, tilting his chin to feel the worn pile, watching the first light of the sun come through the shutters.

He watches me take him in as he's revealed. His head shorn but with a bit of stubble coming in, the thin line that looks like a pouting lip above his left ear. Skin stained and marked like weathered oak. And blending into the 'v' of the blanket, his barrel chest, the angle of the mis-set rib under the fabric but not hidden. I wonder how much he's eaten in the week it must have taken him to come down from the mountains.

*"a boiling new life begins,
and the Friend has something good to eat."*

He knows I'm asking if he's hungry but doesn't answer—squinting, instead, at the worn rug. His lips part and some air goes in and they come together again and he looks up at me with unsure eyes. I shake my head:

*"There is a basket of fresh bread on your head,
and yet you go door to door asking for crusts."*

I stand and return to the kitchen, where there's a salted leg of lamb, carefully wrapped in cheesecloth in the cupboard. Wrinkled, but still good.

Into the garden for tomatoes, cucumbers, mint. Not yet ten o'clock and the morning sun has already turned the rows of plants into the dull color of heat. Stings. Even the tomatoes look pained under the muslin I've stretched above them for shade, stretched as taut as skin. *Don't let your throat tighten with fear. Take sips of breath all day and night, before death closes your mouth.*

Cucumbers, mint, and tomatoes chopped, thrown in a bowl with lemon juice and oil. They put in paprika, in the mountains. I take out the tin I brought back with me and work it open. Doesn't smell like it will work, the dry sweet and wet sour.

*"Look at the chefs preparing special plates
for everyone, according to what they need."*

At the sound of his voice, I look up. He leans in the doorway, the blanket still on his shoulders, the brown wool flattened between his skin and the whitewashed stones. The sun from the little window hits the tin of paprika. It shines in my hand and both of us look at it, at the crimson flakes I've just pinched from its depths. My knuckles are pale in the light. When I glance up at his face again, he seems reversed for a moment, like the inside of a mask.

"Be a full bucket pulled up the dark way of a well," he says, *"then lifted out into light."* He picks up the bucket by the back door, and lalts out into the garden.

He tapped my helmet on a charcoal dawn while I lay in the muck of the trench, said it was time. I knew what he meant. I turned but he had already moved on. The rain slackened enough to let the dawn in, and then I heard him at the far end of our line, cawing like a crow, and the rain came harder and I stepped out of my hole, drawn by that lonely sound, hoping the rest were with me as I lurched forward, unsure of even the next three steps, the ground pitted, covered in bits of metal. Then I saw the man I'd tried to kill for so many months, not raising his rifle but still, like death,

and I felt sure my brother had come earlier and slain him. But no, he lay asleep. His brown jacket was heavier, newer than mine. I smashed his head with my gun and slid into the trench. No shots, but after a time, that cawing again, soft, between the walls of coarse, wet earth there in the foothills—earth that didn't smell or feel like our fertile soil by the coast—and I began to caw, too, and soon every one of us were in the enemy trench, first cawing then whooping with the lightening sky.

The grease on the outside of the lamb has hardened, but pressing the yellow skin, I feel the meat in the center is still soft. The knife is dull. I kneel and glance around the bottom shelf for the sharpening stone.

Only four of theirs died in our attack, and not a one of ours. I bandaged the man who's head I split, and he lived, though his vision suffered. The Colonel came to see us, and we told him about my brother. The Colonel wanted to give him a medal and hear him tell how such a thing had come to his mind, but my brother bowed his head and mumbled a bit about how I was the commanding officer and he'd just followed orders. I disagreed—I told everyone he'd come to me to say it was time, just like the others. The Colonel demanded the truth, said he wasn't looking to punish but promote, and we all demurred, and nudged my brother and pestered him with our eyes. He wouldn't admit it, though. He looked me up and down and said I was the captain. Then he fell out and left us standing there.

We got our orders, climbing out of the trenches and into the wind coming down from the mountains. Soon, the coast was only visible when we came to the top of a hill taller than the last. I dropped to the back of the line, staring over the hills. And on a day with sandbag clouds and the sun barely slipping through the pinholes, a flat line of light flashed at me from the sea and that was the last I saw of it.

The meat slides off the bone. My brother has brought in the well water and now picks up the chair in the corner by the slats in the back. I rush to take the chair—worried that rib might snap and he'll fall—but he shoves me easily out of the way.

“The body is merely a device,” he says, lurching towards the other room, *“to calculate the astronomy of the spirit.”*

When I lost sight of the ocean, I focused on my brother's back, his shoulders and spine. They were the gunbarrel straight I imagined a hero's should be. A couple of men had made him a rope bed that rolled up, and the company bought him his own blanket when we came to a town famous for wool—said it wasn't right, him being a hero and the family's first son, and here he was sharing our grandmother's worn blanket with me. He didn't argue. But I'd catch him, stepping aside and trying to get me to march in front of him, and I'd grab his sides and push him up the hill, following him.

*No matter how fast you run
your shadow more than keeps up.*

The rain and fog of the foothills turned to drifts of snow. We floated through them, and fell to speaking in grunts and gestures, and even in this silent world my brother was somehow more than the rest of us—he learned to sleep in step, and so awoke when we stopped to camp, and took the first watch, every night. Often I rose early in the morning to find the boy who should've taken over for him still asleep as my brother's silhouette stumbled among us, the scratchy wool blanket on his shoulders.

I cut the lamb thick and set aside a few leaves of mint to throw in with the tea after our meal. The smell of the leaves opens my sinuses, makes me hunger for the weight of the meat. I bring the plates and utensils into the main room.

We began to struggle to crest each granite wave of white, our will sinking with us into the valleys as our food ran thin and the sun twisted in eighteen directions over our heads. When at last it chose a mountain wall to drop behind, the blue of the snow and moon would enclose us and pull on all sides of our boots, jackets, blankets. We cleared a space and slept together in a pile on the stiff earth, waking to check the knuckles of our toes and fingers, rubbing the grey blooms of cold that cracked across our skin. Only my brother stayed separate, still watching over us, though we would have surrendered had the enemy but come, had we seen so much as a child walking through those fields of white.

He eats slow, turning his fork over for the small bites of lamb he cuts. I push chunks into my mouth to feel the texture on my tongue and what little juice is left. I watch as the pores of lamb open before him, a touch of moist pink amidst the ash grey, and soon I can't stand it and I have to stop eating and simply stare at the smooth metal of the bicycle against the wall.

A blizzard came one night and my brother kicked us awake, got us moving so we wouldn't freeze. We wandered about, dazed, burning the last scraps of food in our stomachs from three days before. We stomped our feet, swirled our arms, and watched as the beautiful, luminescent feathers glided around and down upon us, on our tongues when we chose to open our mouths as we spun and tumbled into that soft, cool down. Then the kick again, from him or another—on your feet—and more stumbling, all night, until the hollow sun cut through the snow at dawn.

He has finished his lamb, so I reach over and slide the rest of mine onto his plate. I want to feed him full, to cover those ribs. His brown eyes shift from his plate to mine, then move to my face and tighten, weighing something.

“A little curtain-flick, no wider than a slice

of roast meat,” he says, “can reveal hundreds of exploding suns.”

When we awoke from our sleepless night, we were nothing. We turned and faced my brother. He looked us over with his bleary gaze, back, forth—then quickly back again. He cried out. The boy—where was he, the one who used to sleep through his morning watch, the only boy among us. We found him, curled, now content, under the heavy blanket that stretched as far as we could see. He’d fallen and no one had kicked him up.

I knew that would soon be me, for I didn’t have the strength to climb the mountain before us, never mind the endless blue and white of the peaks beyond.

I lay next to the boy. My brother absently kicked me in the hip, but I couldn’t rise. He stood near my feet, the sun behind his head, and told me to get up. I closed my eyes. The tiny walls of snow on either side of my face echoed my ragged breath. This time he kicked me, hard, in the right leg.

When I didn’t respond, he lurched forward and grabbed my jacket with both fists, yanking me to my feet. Then he let go, and I flopped to the earth. He took me again in his hands and shoved me, screaming at me to stand, but my will was crushed, and I fell on top of the boy and this time when he brought his face close, I simply shook my head.

He searched the blank field, and lit on one of the others—the uncle of the dead boy. From where I lay, I saw the look of fear under the man’s bushy black eyebrows in the moment before my brother swept his gaze away. But something had taken root between us all, and in an instant, my brother had his knife out and held me by the hair—I thought he meant to kill me—but he brought the blade down on the cadaver’s neck, sliced it open, and shoved my face into the hole and the slow red slush. Drink, he said.

I couldn't bring myself to do it, even as he pressed me deeper and I couldn't breathe. But he flipped me over onto my back and took a chunk of the boy's soft flesh and shoved it in my mouth, and forced my jaws around it, and shook me until it slid back and down—I gasped and he shoved in more, and shook, and turned me around and mashed my mouth over the wound, where my own body betrayed me and I swallowed, over and over. I had a dim awareness that the others were forced to eat the boy's half-frozen flesh as well. All but my brother, who had brought us there.

I stand with the kettle's cry, and take the tray into the kitchen, unable to watch him eat any longer. Next to the counter, the propane stove blurs before my eyes until I rest my hand lightly on the kettle's side, the metal searing my palm.

The black scent rises from the tea, as the curled, sun-baked leaves drift into the pot and blend with the jagged mint.

He comes into the kitchen. "*Be melting snow,*" he says, "*wash yourself of yourself.*" He starts to rinse the plates, the salad bowl, the utensils. I dry. The walls radiate the heat of the midday sun. When we're finished, the humidity rising from the teapot and the water in the bucket before us fills the kitchen, misting the small window.

I open the back door and gesture to the garden beyond.

*"Steam spills into the courtyard. No one notices
how steam opens the rose of each mind.
Hold out a basket. It fills up so well
that emptiness becomes what you want."*

Sweating, I put the teapot and cups on the tray. He takes the dishtowel, reaches over and wipes my forehead before I can stop him.

"Then the steam evaporates."

*Figures sink back into the wall, eyes blank
ears just lines.”*

In the garden, the sun plays in the leaves of the olive tree. Soon it will drop behind the whitewashed wall and the olive grove beyond, ushering in a breeze from the line of ocean visible in the distance.

He comes to the garden door and stops, blinded by the sun, his back bent, a bit of sweat running along the distended rib.

Yes, we were alive, thanks to him. But we were stained, the dark ink swirling and mixing in our blood as we trudged up the mountain pass all night. My brother led us, and, in my exhaustion, I thought I saw him lit by the thin moon, even as the rest of us blended into the shadows of the rock outcroppings.

When the moon set we couldn't trust our feet and so began to crawl over the snow and rock, the wind at us from all sides. Still in front, he would call each of us by name from time to time, to which we answered with a murmur or grunt.

At dawn we found ourselves huddled on a shelf of rock that divided the valley we'd just left and the one ahead. Behind us were the first signs of sunrise. Before us, a leaden mix of day and dark.

Then we saw it through the haze—a line of smoke, rising from across the valley. A crack in the sky. One of us pointed it out but we had all seen, and we began to shout and hit each other on the back.

I sit, sweating, drinking my tea, waiting for some relief from the pounding sun. When I look over, he is walking between the rows of cucumbers, squash, and beans, just beyond the herbs and tomatoes sheltered under their muslin tarps. He squats, tastes the earth, spits and calls,

“I feel like the ground, astonished. Rain makes

every molecule pregnant with a mystery.

The ground cries out and breaks open.”

What does he mean? The sun hides behind the branches, casting infinite geometric shadows on his face as he comes to the table and drinks straight from the teapot.

He sits, and digs his bare feet into the dirt. The drying sweat on my neck turns to grit with the evening breeze. I start to speak, but he has put down the pot and closed his eyes. *This body, I think, becomes, eventually, like a vest of chainmail in peaceful years, too hot in summer, too cold in winter.*

On that mountain platform I felt I was floating outside my body, turning and looking at the others, the dried blood on our clothes, our faces, our mouths. I saw the vague outline of the peaks behind us, hiding the sun, and beneath them, the valley we had climbed out of—a calm sea of grey, but for the shadow of what we had done in the center, blooming out.

And before us, my brother, the leader, standing apart. Clean.

The blood heaved in my veins. My shaking hands reached for the barrel of the gun strapped on my back. It came free and moved in an easy arc over my head, whistling down into his shoulderblade, popping his head back. I clenched my fingers against the cold metal and did it again, until he buckled and fell at our feet, stunned.

Not enough.

Fingers gripping his hair, the other hand on his belt, I lifted him over me, face to the sky. He struggled to twist and catch hold of my arms, but he was weak.

Everything paused. Jaw, chest, biceps tight, hands shaking, my brother's silhouette against the grey clouds—I willed myself not to do what had already been

done, the weight of his body still ringing against my palms. For I had thrown him, down, into the dark.

“For years I pulled my own existence out of emptiness.

Then one swoop, one swing of the arm,

that work is over.

Free of who I was, free of presence, free of

dangerous fear, hope,

free of mountainous wanting.”

Eyes closed, half asleep in the garden, my brother’s breathing comes from beside my chair. But which of us has whispered these words?

No cry, no sound from below. So silent it seemed nothing had happened, my arms still outstretched, the density of the light lifting around us. Wordlessly, I got on my knees and began to feel my way in the snow, descending after him.

Always, after him. Behind in birth, in school, trailing he and grandmother while harvesting olives, following him into the war.

We woke on the morning of our tenth birthday, cold, the blanket missing from our bed. The heavy purple sky outside the window mixed with grandmother’s voice, calling to us from the other room. She had hidden something under the blanket, and she moved it towards my brother, soft, the pedals and wheels of his new machine clicking. An adult’s bike—black, like her dress. Only two hours older but she insisted it was his, kept calling it his machine. She wanted him to study it, perhaps design his own.

But we used it instead to kick up the sand on the streets, him steering and me holding his sides while we scattered the chickens and the other boys and felt the salt in the wind. We pedaled ever harder down the hill, onto the bumping, slatted wood

dock and over the edge into space, holding each other, pushing the bike away before we hit the sea. Then we wrestled the metal through the surf, onto the beach, and back up to our house, where grandmother knocked our heads together and made me rub olive oil on the chain and wheels. To save his machine from rust.

Do you know why your soul-mirror

Does not reflect as clearly as it might?

Because rust has begun to creep over it

And it needs to be cleaned.

From afar, he looked dead. Sprawled under a cliff, face-up, just as I'd thrown him. The bile in my stomach broke free and started to rise. Then he coughed.

'Because of you,' grandmother had said. I nearly fell out of the olive tree where I was shaking the branches, hand-picking the stubborn olives and tossing them into the sheet below. 'If you must know, she died because of you.'

We had worked all day in silence. Fifteen years old, my brother at school, we'd spent many days like this, her trying to muffle her hatred of me in her silence, answering questions with a single word, a nod of the head, the two of us walking in the weeds between the endless, ashen olive trees. I had decided to ask about my mother's death, anything to dent the air between us.

'You wouldn't come out. Your brother had come out so easily. But not you. Thirty minutes, an hour, an hour and a half, we waited. The doctor became afraid. He stuck his big hand in her and grabbed your foot and yanked you out. Tore her, inside. She bled to death before he could do anything.'

I fell on the sheet and the olives. She walked to the edge of the sheet and watched me struggle to get my breath back. 'Your brother cried. But not you. You slept.'

The sound, as he shifts from squatting to sitting in the grass beside my chair, works its way slowly through the cave of my ear, along with his murmuring voice.

*“A man sleeps heavily,
though something blazes in him like the sun,
like a magnificent fringe sewn up under the hem.”*

We approached his body as he struggled to breathe. Hip dislocated, shoulder broken, head a mess of scrapes—these were nothing, but his shallow, wet breath meant blood in his lungs. Meant he could drown or bleed to death with no external sign.

The others were tense, ready to restrain me. But hearing him inhale in such pain, seeing how his straight back had been fractured over the rocks—the knowledge began to surface within the well of my churning mind that I was whole. Whole for the first time. Even my brother only now seemed to have become human. Watching his life ebb, I hurried to tell him what I had just come to see—I almost cried and laughed aloud as I hopped through the rocks to his side.

Twilight has come when I open my eyes. My brother’s gone, the house dark, the back door yawning. A pigeon flaps onto the roof of the house, its claws tapping on the ceramic tiles as it paces. Its coo makes me jump, cutting as it does, across the silence. It continues its mournful call.

*Listen to the story told by the reed,
of being separated.
‘Since I was cut, I have made this crying sound.
Anyone apart from someone he loves
understands what I say.’*

Time to water the garden. I swing the trough under the spigot and start pumping. Water rushes to the tomatoes, squash, beans, cucumbers. When I stop, the water flows for some moments more, the bond between the molecules stronger than gravity.

As the stars come out, I start inside. In the dark kitchen, I fumble for the box of matches, light the lantern, and set it on the counter.

The bicycle is in the other room, the blanket draped over the back of the slatted chair. His whispering returns in the sound of the breeze in the shutters.

“Do you think I know what I’m doing?”

That for one breath or half-breath I belong to myself?”

I stride into the next room, take the blanket, open the door, and wheel the bicycle out into the night. The road goes up the hill, away from our village, the sea and the olive groves, leveling out as it cuts across the fields on the plain before the foothills. I push harder on the pedals, though I can barely make out the white gravel in the dregs of moonlight. But I know the fields of wheat on either side are soft, and what’s more, I can feel the way without seeing.