

X: infinity

A young woman died somewhere around here a few weeks ago, near my favorite river, which rumbles 2,000' beneath me. I lounge on the ridge, sun nearly sunken; I'll be down there tomorrow, early. I saw her pictures - pretty girl. Lush, curly chocolate hair; smooth vanilla skin; big ol' doe eyes; full lips. Only 26. Cause of death not reported, but easy to guess given she'd been defiled by depression: suicide. Why here? This is among the lovelier places in California - I wonder if she chose it for that, wanting to die surrounded by wild beauty, the pines and firs and robins. Maybe she came here hoping for a reason to live beyond humanity; if so, her death suggests she didn't find it. Maybe she chose it because she figured no one would be here to interfere if she took the soft ride to oblivion, a narcotic monster dose. Given how deeply this world can hurt, I couldn't blame her if she did ride on softly out.

What'd she do, what'd she feel? Did she bow her head down onto her knees and cry, or could she not even cry anymore, and that's why she killed herself: quoting Uniform Choice (I know, of all bands a Minor Threat derivative), "the feeling of no feeling is the worst kind of pain"? Nearly needless to write, she certainly felt helpless, hopeless, worthless, the black-hole vacuum of death promising more than the extension of her young life that still held so much potential left to actualize, to do and be *something*. Although...maybe the converse was true, maybe she was a vile, narcissistic or psychopathic cunt, a bitch or parasite to all who detracted from life, and her death freed the energy and flesh and bone that was her to be used by better life. I've known some real fuckin' ugly people whose place in this space would be better used if not them - some really selfish, cruel, cowardly, petty motherfuckers. But, nah, that wasn't this girl - those sociopaths, they lack the capacity to feel the despair that leads to suicide. And suicide is, from one perspective, the ultimate magnanimity. So I can only conclude the opposite - this poor, damaged girl, she was able to feel so deeply, so deeply that she just couldn't stand it anymore, and if that feeling, that depth, could've only been inverted - she might've been able to touch the stars.

I nearly killed myself around her age, just a year younger at the quarter-century mark, a clearly exaggerated response to failing to live up to totally unrealistic expectations. The drink-myself-to-death Western America drive. My version of *Leaving Las Vegas - Leaving the West*. I, in my own way, looked for some pretty Wild for the final scene - into the verdant, expansive conifer-clothed ranges of Washington and Idaho and Montana and Utah, but then somehow, regrettably, ending up in the barren squalor of Las Vegas, Nevada, and, worse, worst, Lancaster. The abyss was chillingly close - my skin'd jaundiced from my abused liver. But unlike that poor, pretty girl who stepped over that precipice to black-ice vapor, somehow - I halted at the edge, I stepped back, I survived, and then clambered out and revived. And though I've wallowed through many low periods since, none have been as deep. I've been mysteriously resilient, but I can't deny that I'm still fragile - one stupid move, and I'm snuffed.

I somehow still live, and so I mourn for the dead girl.

On the river proper now, and the dead girl floods my thoughts. Her energy - where'd it go when she died? It - *she* - didn't just disappear - she couldn't: that'd violate physics, where energy can only be transformed and not destroyed. Maybe her energy left and expanded as a slight breeze, ruffling the leaves. Maybe a little heat that was just enough to spur new leaf growth on the

billowing black oaks. Maybe she permeated the soil, exciting microbes a touch more, stimulating the worms and other scavengers, priming 'em to transform her lifeless body to them had her flesh and blood and bone been left here, to then be eaten by larger animals, up and up and up, 'til she's a sparkle in the eagle's eye. Or maybe I passed her death site on the way down here, somewhere, and a vestige of her entered me, and now I write her requiem with her last flash. Whatever - she's not just gone: she's this place, and that includes me.



I found out right after returning from a wild trip in the wild Warner Mountains, where I challenged a cougar, where I plunged into a freezing lake with blue-backed rainbows and my bones shivered to snow, where I marched along a rusty Martian landscape swirling in dust and smoke and wailing winds, where I basked in a pulsing meadow of rainbow color and energy and music coming from a trilling little stream, where a big-ass slab rock sailed out from under me on a steep slope and I banged my shin up real bloody bad. The cat, the rock - could've been much more intense than just a racing heart and a big bruise - could've held me there. He'd died - 45 years old - much, much too young, and with three kids. Despite the stony wall imprisoning my softer emotions, it struck, his death, it struck, hammering down into the marrow of my heart, just a loss, a sudden vacuum. I bawled like an abandoned baby. He was one of my best friends - for a decade, we were tight. Such an awesome dude, ton of energy, so magnanimous, ruddy - a real brother. I'd lost contact with him after my second breakdown, as I did most the old crew, too ashamed of my weaknesses, my damage. After rebuilding myself, I thought of him often, often thought I should rekindle that friendship, but I was just too scared to pick up the fuckin' phone and ring him up. And now it's too fuckin' late.

His death, though, closed our circle, and reconnected for the first time in a long time a lot of really wonderful people, my real family that I'd let escape me. A regeneration, the nostalgia flooding from over 20 years ago to now, where we've all diverged but still have common ground. A profound event, like an electronic funeral in a way, since we all used the phone - had to, since we all now live far away from each other - to communicate. "Funeral" - ostensibly it's to honor the one who died, but, really, it's about regeneration of resonance among those still alive. And so "funeral" really ain't the right word - "ritual" is.



Surrounded by towering, emerald ponderosa pines and incense-cedars and Doug firs, in indigo shadow, rambling honeysuckle and prickly blackberry vines at the pool's edge, a few stout young alders and baby conifers rising within the tangles of the scrambling brambles. A harsh, dry wind shakes the dawn-lit tops of the pines and firs, and a sickly, blackened little brook, raped by the miners, trills nearby, a deceitful music, a dirge masked as jangle, but the black pool lies motionless, deathly and deceptively silent, reflecting perfectly the spiring trees above, the brambles and infant trees to the sides, an all-seeing mother-eye. Still, I can see below the mirror surface a fallen old dead log, though not quite dead, seemingly reaching far down below, but my vision only penetrates several inches to where some branches start, so I can't see if that log or those

branches ever reach the bottom - or if a bottom even exists. Starlight flashes splash like fireworks all over my vision, and I swoon, needing to lean on one of the young stout alders to stay upright - my feet tingle, feel unsure, unstable. And into the black pool the branches reach, and I don't think a bottom does exist, that the black pool falls forever through time, the branches reaching ever back, becoming ever smaller, ever more sensitive and tuned and plucked and waved with the subtle rustle and sway of the pool's nearly indiscernible currents, becoming one with 'em, and though I can't see 'em, it's as if, starlight fireworks blowing up in my eyes, that I can feel 'em, feel 'em in the soft velvet moist grass of a verdant island within earshot of the swing and swoon of the ocean's mighty tides of ancient time, in the hunt for a wild boar through the fog-shrouded sable forests of ancient time, in the swoop of the land down the slope to where rain-drenched pines and firs embrace a soft meadow in ancient time, and then rising up, up, and up, ever contracting, constricting, walls, mud walls turning to stone and then concrete, ever constricting, and the spirit crumbles, withers, and the branches retract into the billowing big broad trunk, no room for branches any longer, just a big fuckin' trunk where branch scars remain the only memories of the branches, and the stout trunk reaches the surface, insensitive to the murmur of current, and then...I can see again. The starlights dim, I feel my feet more solid to the ground, and the world becomes sharper, resolves, and I look on the surface of the black pool and only see the reflection, the beautiful expansion of the conifer trunks to branches to twigs to needles, the tops of the gallant trees waving with the wind, and the frothing vines ranging with gangly limbs here and there and everywhere.

I get down on hands and knees, on the soft duff blanket of the pine and fir needles, and I look into my face of the black pool. Is that really me? I'm not sure - I see my face, uncouth big ol' Elvis-like chops, cheap cap like a teenager's, weathered horn-rimmed glasses for myopic eyes, face creases of a middle-aged man - but I see beyond it, too, into the water, but just a little bit, and what I see I can't resolve - it blurs, wavers and blends, it just won't fuckin' stay in place for me to be able to identify it. Seems as if I'm not supposed to identify it, put words to it, reason it out - I'm supposed to see it without vision, to understand it without thinking. I slowly reach out my finger and just barely touch the surface, myself, and just that tiny touch ripples me totally out of focus, my intrusion disintegrating the vision, the feeling, and all that remains is the icy cold of the black pond on my finger, numbing it to ice. Like Death. I quickly pull my finger out, but the ripple continues, slowing, but continuing nonetheless, the image dissolved, the ripple reaching then nearly silently lapping the shore, and a lone little auburn fir needle sways, ever so subtly.