

Anthony Oag

## Dark Territory

*“A span of the bridge collapsed under the weight of the train and all but the passenger car and the caboose were spared from the waters below. Wrecking crews were dispatched, clean up was done and the bridge was rebuilt but no one seems to know for sure if the engine was ever recovered.”*

- Eric Oullette on the disappearance of CPR Locomotive 508 in the year 1900

1

I have not seen the train but I feel it. It was the first sound I heard when I opened my eyes. The whistle. If you could call it that. My sweat slicked head rose from the pillow into the scream of that faraway engine. Fitch was still with me then, small and withdrawn into the corner of that abandoned house as I listened desperately to the fading alarm of its passing somewhere in the landscape. They tried to explain it to me—the things I already knew, they were so curious, leaning forward, wanting to tell everything at once.

That is gone. They are gone. I must be out searching for them. That is why I am here amongst the half dead trees. Again, I wish it were that easy to explain, that this was some investigation into the disappearance of a friend. But, if I find myself looking for traces of my companion it is by accident. I might look up from some deep stare and find that I am over the mountain I had previously only seen from a distance and suddenly wonder if I heard their voice, a

whisper from some hollow, and I might turn to see them emerge and know that they had only been lost in the woods and we would return home. But there is no home. And my companion is not lost. Lost things can be retrieved, sought after and returned. To be in this place is to be lost already. To be gone is to be gone. And here I am, wandering below the gray and stormless sky because I do not know how to stop.

I was with Fitch the first time I crested the ridge and looked down upon the vast gray expanse of the lake. *That's no lake* they said, kicking at something on the ground. *Don't go there, the maps don't explain it either, I tried to draw it up.* Fitch showed me the maps. There were rooms full of them, all hand drawn on whatever paper they could find. They'd come to me unsolicited some evenings and thrust an open notebook into my lap, pointing at things I mostly didn't understand.

### *The Trench*

That was the name for the lake that was not a lake. I had to go see it for myself. Of course, Fitch was right, it wasn't a lake. Not like any lake I knew. Scribbled on the page of a notebook, the name seemed unconvincing. *The Trench.* But as I stood alone, by the towering shapes of the industrial plant, I felt the weight of its name settle in my mind.

All along the shore, edges dropped downward only to fade into the mist of whatever lay below. It could've been clouds, fog, sky, a reflection of the overcast muddled into a strange symmetry. There were things down there too, caught in the atmosphere. That is when I wish I would've walked away, but by the time I thought of it, I already knew too much of what I was seeing. There were people down there, animals too. What could've been debris became the fractured shapes of bodies in an unfinished fall, stretched figures, frozen in place, pulled apart. The wind I'd heard moving below was now the echo of frantic whispers, voices in conversation with nothing and no one.

I haven't been back since.

That gray is out before me now. Even all the way up here on the ridge, the view is unsettling. An ocean with no opposite shoreline, with no waves to wet the rocks of a harbor. It is the impression of what has been, a black and white polaroid, a drifting planet. I can see the water tower sprouting like a configuration of strange bone. I can see the industrial plant and the bridges over what used to be a highway. It's a museum of sorts, an after hours open house and I am on my way to an exhibit that I may never find. It's a collection gone bad, rotting pages of a billion unfinished stories swirling amongst the half lives of the seasons here: a dead place that never dies, a going onward to that final light and far, far past. Or not far enough. As I am looking down upon the valley I hear an approaching sound, and my head lifts. The train comes, churning through a patch of forest, hidden but for the trails of steam that trace the tops of trees like the tip of a shark fin breaching a wave.

### *Before*

The train exhibit was huge. I could feel the swelling of anticipation as I stood to take in the entrance to the room. Tables against the walls were almost too high for me to see over. Above me, Sierra squealed from her dad's shoulders and pointed out over the room as a black model train engine raced over a miniature suspension bridge. It was a tiny world, undulating down halls, reappearing on the other side of doorways. Usually I'd be annoyed by the babyish noises my cousin made when she got excited but I hardly paid any attention to her. I was lost in a fog of discovery. I lagged behind my uncle Rob as he ducked under doorways, smiling when Sierra pointed out every new train. People moved around me, children speaking in excited whispers, floorboards creaking under the weight of strangers. It all felt like one sound to me. A shifting white noise to keep me intent upon the details of all the small wonders I would miss if I looked away for too long. I stared at the painted blue lakes and the toothpick-thin lampposts lining the streets of tiny plastic mountain towns, at the darkened openings of tunnels, listening for the electric hum of a toy locomotive approaching. I wondered what lay behind the hills I couldn't see over. I imagined myself, shrunk

down, wandering the empty streets with a countryside all to myself. As I caught up to my uncle Rob I saw him point, his eyes glittering in that overbright way they always did. When I stepped into the room I saw the biggest exhibit yet. There was a sloping forest, multiple rivers and train tunnels, and a space of track that wound along the side of a small mountain.

Rob was pointing to the tunnel at the base of the mountain. Its arches were made to look old, splotches of rust colored paint line the stone gray structure. The entrance was dark, a deep spot of shadow. I just waited there, hands on the table, leaning closer, hearing nothing.

I knew it was coming, just for me, from the other side of the wall. *Watch* Rob said, smiling wider. And I watched. And I waited.

## 2

Each day I come closer to it. I don't know what "it" is exactly. There is the wandering, the straying about as if I have risen to go and get something that when I step out the door I forget. But there is so much to see. Like those rooms upon rooms of model train sets. Everyday something new and nearly hidden by the mossy growths of time and decay might show itself and for a moment I wonder if I have arrived somewhere else.

I follow the river. I'm unsure if it's always the same river. Sometimes I'll branch off and follow a stream. I think I must have always liked water. I'm around it all the time, drawn to walk along its edges, to observe the surface and the shapes moving below. I'll be out some days, passing by as the trout linger in the current, unsure of which way to swim, and then, coming around a corner I'll stop, expectant, gazing about a clearing, peering into the shadowed dark of a forest or along the slow swaying weeds of a field. Each time I grow more wary of what I think I might see; at first it was amusing—a peculiarity to be smirked at. But it has started to gather in my conscience. I am beginning to feel

like a fish glimpsing the flash of a barbed hook in its peripheral. Can I search for something accidentally, or am I being lured? I wonder the same of the others.

There are others—people—coming and mostly going, like wild animals, disappearing as quickly as they'd stepped into view. Fitch seemed to think they were dangerous but I've not felt that way at all. Fitch had a run in with one of them, something happened. I never got to hear the story. All I can say is what I see of them, and that is almost nothing. I think they are like me—like Fitch. Stuck. Somewhere after death, yet to reach the other side. Here is our station, but where is our ride?

### *Before*

Nobody knew I was there, hovering inside the doorway of the kitchen. I snuck in through the back door cause I was late for dinner. No one was waiting for me though. The soup was lightly steaming on the stovetop, and I could hear low voices coming from the front of the house. The weather was getting bad outside—maybe the last storm of the year. I could see trees waving furiously through the window over the kitchen sink, dead leaves rushing upward through the faint glow of the street light. When I got closer to the dining room doorway I could hear Uncle Rob's voice. He'd been over a lot since Sierra died.

She was playing in her parents bedroom, jumping on the bed until she fell off and...

Rob was softly sobbing now, a bad sound. Something in it, something in the whole feel of the moment felt bad, made my stomach churn. He was the one who found her. I don't know the details of what happened because my parents won't talk about it in front of me. I leaned into the dining room, careful not to bump into the china cabinet. My uncle was trying to say something but I couldn't make out any sensible words, he was barely choking them out.

*Rob? What's wrong?*

It was my mother. And I thought, geez mom, his daughter died, whattaya think is wrong?!

The sobbing got louder, an ugly gargled sound.

*I... I didn't mean... It wasn't supposed to be like this! I loved her more than anybody else! I still do... It was an accident.*

He paused, breathing in ragged, hysteric gasps.

*She liked when I held her down, it was our game, our secret game and she was laughing. And it was so... And then...*

Rob paused and his voice lightened, seeming to stop the tears.

*She was gone.*

I felt sick, a deep, rising illness coming into my throat and my head and the spaces behind my eyes. I was so focused on trying to hear what was being said that I didn't see the flashing lights at the front door. They cast red and blue patterns down the hallway, interrupting the gathering dark of the autumn night. Rob was sobbing again, muttering hysterically.

*I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...*

Then there was a knock at the door and the police came in. Voices rose, but I didn't understand much of what they were saying. My mom said a bad word. She said a lot of bad words. That made me scared, made the something that was wrong seem so much worse. I wished I'd run upstairs to my room or stayed outside in the cold. I looked down the hall and through the front door, watching as the officers escorted uncle Rob to the police car and pushed him inside. My mother was sobbing now, knelt on the floor of the living room in a heap. It was too much to take and I ran out from my hiding place.

*Mom?*

I said, my voice small and shuddering.

No one seemed to notice me. Dad was at the big front window, staring blankly at the fading lights of the police cruiser as they disappeared, leaving nothing but an empty street. I remember the wind whining in the cracks of places, trying to get in. I remember that awful sobbing that never seemed to stop, and my parents eyes as they turned to see me standing in the entryway. Below all of those whisperings was the sound of the train, a deep thrum in the distance, passing in the night.

3

Suddenly the day is dark, or I have finally noticed. I have gone so far and yet my feet do not ache. I don't know where I am, but that is not so strange. I rarely know the places I walk. The night is not fully dark, it never gets that way here, from what I can tell. It is as if a curtain were slowly drawn, a tattered translucent thing creating shadows but not darkness. I do not like being out at night here. There is a peculiar, unfinished gloom, as if someone has gone to bed without shutting the kitchen light off.

The field around me is a vast and vacant farmland. A grain silo looms in front of a partially crumbled barn. There is even the remains of a house and a sense of coming home. A hunger, deep and dull, as if there were food on a stovetop keeping warm. But that hunger is not even the same here. I feel it in my stomach as someone with a missing hand might feel a stab of pain where the fingers used to be.

I must get back. And even as I think that, it is too late. Too late to miss the shape standing by the barn. The whimper comes from a distance, swimming up from the weeds to meet my ears. There is a hitch of breath as the sound becomes a sob and the figure sags as if weighed down by something too heavy to carry. A voice that makes no sentences and forms no words.

Fuck. I should've turned back hours ago, I should've seen the way the day darkened. Fitch would never have let this happen. This place is far too dreamy. There is that feeling of being caught in the nightmare, some part of me

screaming to wake up as I watch from the inside as everything happens in slow motion. I have not yet found out how to shake myself from the dream. I am only plunged further into the sleep cycle, strained into the bowl of the next dream which is all the same dream. The sobbing follows me even as I tread over hills and down the banks of dried up streams, over bridges and boulders. Everytime I see the blur of the figure, I turn and it is lost at my peripheral, like some speck on the lens, out of focus but always impeding. It's such a small sound. It is the only sound. I glance around at the remains of a forest, scattered trees, roots like huge snake skins in the leaves, the whole ground is leaves. I can see faces in them, wrinkled, leering faces wanting me to stop. I keep seeing him, or keep thinking I am seeing him, hugging himself hysterically, shaking amongst the trees. I cannot say his name. Cannot think it. Even as the shape of a child giggles somewhere along the path ahead and I see Rob's arms open as he slumps forward like some tumbling pile of debris. I must keep going, Must not think his name again, must not watch her little feet trodding through the blackened leaves.

The weeping grows into a low shriek, a howling, spiraling sound and I break into a run, barreling through the gray expanse of undulating terrain, toward the outline of the abandoned house, sitting low amongst the barren trees.

### *Before*

I could see the windmills on the other side of the lake. White statues on the horizon framing the edges of sight. I spent so much time delivering in these hills, outside of town, looking out over the watershed, and the industrial plant, the interstate and the vast green that drops off suddenly into the oceanic expanse of the lake. It was shockingly bright, nearly cloudless, allowing me to see beyond and beyond and beyond. I could see the outline of the city skyline on the opposite shore, some hundred miles away. That was why I passed my next stop. I threw the van in reverse and backed up along the shoulder of the road. The house was impossible to see from where I was parked. A layer of pine branches hung low and wild, concealing the property. I stepped out and around the back of the vehicle to lug the sixty



pound box of dog food across the road. I'd only been here once before and they got the same thing. It took me a few minutes of driving around to even find it that first time. Number 1203. The 0 was missing and the 2 was hanging upside down on the side of the mailbox like a backwards 5. As I stepped onto the driveway I felt a seed of dread at the back of my mind and glanced about warily.

It'd gone dark.

The bright noon sun was intercepted by the arms of the forest. There were shadows all about and a damp smell of mildew lingered in the air. There were piles of junk everywhere, leaning, rotten things. There was an old truck, rusted away in the sparse weeds amongst the tatters of plastic tarps and glass bottles. The house seemed to hide behind the forgotten pieces of a larger whole. At every moment I expected to see a dog come snarling out from behind a pile of old firewood, but it didn't come. The dog was already in front of me, seated by the cracked and sinking boards of the porch. I didn't see it until there was no point in running, until I was too close to back away unseen. It was huge. Dried mud coats its front legs, body rigid and unmoving as it stared off through the shadows of forest. For a moment I was relieved, believing the dog must be blind to not have seen me by now, but as soon as I gently set the box down, it turned, almost as an afterthought. Our eyes met, and then it turned back, disinterested. I followed its gaze, that bad feeling still sinking in my guts. The sweat creased my brow, fingers tingling as if I was looking down from some devastating height. I looked out, past the stack of tires, past the fallen shape of some unrecognizable lawn decoration, past the single room shed, a railroad crossing sign nailed to its exterior.

I could see it suddenly.

Or where it went.

The green dark further on, and then, further on. And I felt the water behind my eyes and the weight settled, kneading further its hands into the blanket of my skin. For a moment I was certain that no matter how much I wanted to, I would not be able to move, and I would remain, lie down in the dirt and wait. And then I was back out in the sunlight, blinking at the wisps of clouds moving in over the lake, hearing the shrill chatter of birds and red squirrels in the forest. Behind the wheel of the van I stared out through the windshield, listening to my own breaths. As I turned

on my blinker and released the brake pedal, a car horn blared and I pumped the brakes as a red SUV sped past me. I closed my eyes and let out a long slow breath. After a few moments had passed I checked my side mirrors and pulled out into the road.

4

At some point on my way back to the house I stop hearing the cries of the thing behind me. It is not a man. I do not want to call it a man. However, I still think I can hear it faintly, as if from the bottom of a valley it wanders to my ears on an updraft of breeze. The house comes into view, the welcoming stance of its shape, a dim victory. I wonder for a moment if that sobbing man—

thing

were still behind me, would I be able to find the house? I wonder.

And then there it is, scattering like wings in the treetops, the whisper of its presence, the choked, wet sounds of its struggle to breathe and weep somewhere in the distance. I don't turn to look, I pull open the door, hear its weight drag on the floorboards of the small porch. I go to the cupboard and retrieve the matches, setting candles alight. Only two of them won't light today and I am relieved. As I watch the orange glow come alive a sense of nostalgia flares within me, and there is the breathtaking moment of anticipation when for a moment I believe that I will hear a voice call from the kitchen, heavy boots at the door stomping the snow away, people removing jackets, mingled voices, the sweet smell of pine. And then it is just me in the front room alone in the dim candlelight. I walk to the fridge to check if it is cold. If it isn't, I'll have to throw out the fish I caught last week. How badly I wish for a bonfire. Fitch loved fires, though they never really told me. There'd be long nights with us staring into the flames, reminiscing on things from before and things to come, odd, unknown things too. We could go on for hours in silence until someone said

something and we started all over again, wondering. At the end of those nights I always went in first. I'd glance out the stained second floor window before drifting off to sleep and see Fitch, still hunched, eyes fixed on the flames.

Before I can reach the fridge I look up through the tiny window over the kitchen sink.

*Fitch?*

I feel myself say, as my eyes focus on a figure outside. Before I can even take a second look I'm on my way out the front door again, grabbing my coat off of the back of the recliner on my way out. The figure is running from me.

Why are they running?

*Fitch!*

I call out and immediately regret it. I have to shut my goddamn mouth if I don't want that babbling thing from earlier to find me. I zip the coat up as I run. It isn't cold. No more than usual, but it makes me feel better to have a layer between myself and this place.

Why the fuck are they running? Fitch is weird but this is just infuriating. They of all people should know that what they are doing is a shitty thing to be doing.

We are on the open side, the wide expanse of grasslands and swamps, streams and river deltas and flat forests. It is night now. This is the darkest it will get. Ahead of me, every so often through the murk of the twilight I see Fitch scrambling further and further onward. I am losing hope. I never had hope. I wish I could be tired, to feel the true ache of the miles and fall down amongst the leaves to let the darkness rush over me.

There is a sound somewhere ahead that makes me stop. It's brief but unmissable: a metallic screech of steel on steel. I scan the trees ahead, watch their gray frills sit still as if listening. I keep moving.

I cross a wet field, stumble over long deserted gopher holes and divots in the dirt. I am in the pines now, under the long fans of their branches.

My eyes adjust and I see them, Fitch, standing by the house. There is a house now, a rough gravel drive leading up to it. None of that matters, I am running.

*You're gonna get us killed! Worse than killed!*

I say, unable to contain my distress.

*Where ba-*

The figure is not Fitch. It is a mannequin. Some scarecrow-like assortment of scraps made to look like a person. It looks a lot like Fitch. As I study it up close I can see the chin length messy hair made of dried grass, the oversized flannel jacket draped about the shoulders. It looks a lot like Fitch's jacket.

For the first time I glance around. Scrap piles are everywhere, partially veiled by decay, as if they were just another part of the terrain. It doesn't take me long to recognize the pieces of my dream—the old truck, the yellowed glass bottles, the sunken structure of the house. Even the lawn decoration, a giraffe wearing a varsity jacket, neck bent and deformed with the passage of time. I remember the dog suddenly and feel dread.

The leash is at my feet, the chain snapped and pulled apart, slumped in the weeds like a discarded snake skin. I look up, following the gaze from the dream, looking out over the mounds of discarded things. The railroad crossing sign still hanging from the wall of the shed, faded, but there. I stand as if hearing some movement out there beyond the green dark of the understory. There is music, a silent progression of chords and atmosphere and I go to it, feeling my way down. A pathway looms into focus like a giddy nightmare, pulling me toward the downward sloping of the forest. I suppose this is the downside. The hellish dropoff that will lead me to *The Trench* or into the bowels of a long forgotten mine shaft. Behind me the sleeves of the jacket sway on the mannequin.

I can hear it now, not just the atmosphere, not just the ambience of sky and trees, but something coming through the dirt. There is a thrumming soundscape pounding beneath my feet and the way becomes blue. It seems strange but that's the word that comes to me. Blue. Like the color of a sky after sunset. Like trying to look through deep water. As I move through the tangles of the forest I can't seem to regulate the space between daydream and what I am seeing. Down over a steep decline I fumble as if in slow motion against the sudden addition of an ocean current and suck in a breath, certain that I will choke on saltwater. It never happens, though the sloshing sound of the deep

always remains, always terrifies and entrances at the same time. In one moment I am caught forever in that place, and in the next I have traversed it. Come out on the other side.

A flat expanse of ground spreads out before me. At my feet beams lay strewn about, pieces fallen from some track, metal rungs and railroad spikes. There is a bridge, rising up beyond the plane. Just within sight it stands, shrouded in moss, its archway clung with ivy and the wilting of tiny dying trees. It is so silent I hardly allow myself to breathe. That wind is gone. That constant shifting of atmosphere has become the distant glimmer of a star behind a cloud. I cannot turn my eyes from the bridge. If I did, I wouldn't be crossing the field, stepping softly over the scattered pieces of metal and machinery, cogs and dead things. I would see him following, the sobbing man, silenced and lingering like a shadow at my back. That would've stopped me. Or that's what I believe. Instead I traverse the craterous space and begin to ascend the hill, feeling that maybe Fitch will be at the top with one of his maps sprawled on the ground, trying to plot his way home. My hands dig into the soft earth and I lift myself onto the bridge.

There is a lone mountain just ahead, its face impeding. One gaping black mouth spreads below its eyeless skull—a tunnel, deep and dark as the swirling in my guts.

Below me in the yard I still do not see him, do not see the girl holding his hand, both staring up, watching, waiting.

The whistle comes suddenly, ripping through the silence, a deep, shaking howl like the pounding of a waterfall into a riverbed.

Standing on the train tracks my legs pulse with the force of its coming. I should flinch or something, go screaming into the bushes, stumbling back through the field in a frenzy. It seems silly. To run and jump and scatter. I was not made to scatter, to race and roam and go on. I go to the mouth of the tunnel, stand below its entrance as if waiting to knock, to pull some lever, and as the sound of the train becomes an endless roar, I take one step into the darkness.