

Jordana Meade

Than Since When I Left

THEY'RE AT THE SHIPYARD WHERE THE HEAVY CRATES HANG ABOVE AND IT'S QUIET BECAUSE IT'S STILL EARLY ON A SUNDAY. THERE'S THE TABLE TENNIS, UNTOUCHED. THE SPEAKERS PLAY, DON'T BLARE. IT'S GOOD TO FEEL THE WATER BREEZE WITHOUT THEIR GUARD UP, WHICH THEY WEAR AS CHAINMAIL UNDER THEIR DRESS. THE GARAGE DOORS ARE UP AND IT'S DARK BRIGHT DARK BRIGHT DARK BRIGHT. THEY WALK THROUGH AND IT'S PRESENT AND BLUE AND WIDE.

"I'm leaving for a bit." Everything expands.

"I'm telling maman I'm staying by you," Tula pauses then continues, "I'm pregnant," she lies. "I'm taking care of it."

Anna doesn't believe her, but cares enough to let her go. Or decides to stop caring and just lets her go.

"I could go with you," Anna suggests flatly because she feels she should, and then suspects she may actually want to go. Tula moans as if thinking then returns, "no."

They both swallow. Anna's fingers tongue at an upright splinter in the table. She squints toward a faraway cluster of sailboats. There are few fish below. The water is smooth and lazy like marble and they sit,

patiently, savoring these last drops. This familiarity they know they share with no one else, they've let it run through their fingers. And now they flex and clench their palms to watch the last bit of wetness evaporate.

After Tula returns they don't see each other again for years, and they're not connected like this again until long after – but before her second death – during the times when they're surrounded by others drunk on gossip. They'll hold onto their past in their back pockets.

IN THIS PART THERE'S THE BUSH AND THE CLAY AND THE STICKS, AND THERE'S THE BRIGHT CITY AND WATER AND THEY NEARLY KISS.

Tula mourned the loss of her first. She mourned profoundly– and of course quietly–because, like teeth lost, her soul left too nonchalantly. Babies knew, they'd vibrate and point short fingers toward her. Old dogs would be drawn to and then repelled by her small body, pulling in and skittering out. She'd glide during the day into dark and slept more while awake.

ME

ON THE BUS

Today is bright. But I can see it's not pleasant because it's hot and blurred white so everyone stares down for the world to open up.

Ok, here they are, bumping along almost in unison. Faces pucker and are veiled yellow. Dust puffs in, bloating the cab and pricking his glasses until they're opaque, but he doesn't clean them. He's only four seats behind her. She doesn't turn around – never, not at all, but if she were paying full attention she'd hear a whisper teasing to do so – not mine, maybe his – the one that left.

Ah, and there it is! The first moment he sees her. Her neck. He sees it's dark and young. He sees how it tapers to fit her shoulders and support her head, which is explicit in its roundness because of her close-cut hair.

After this, years later back in New York – years after he tears up at the birth of his granddaughter, even further after he feels his wife’s final breath evaporate beside him– he never forgets Tula’s silhouette. The last time it flashes it is its most brilliant: He’s back blanketed in hot, blinded by bright, cooled on his buttocks, and learning to breathe the muslin of dust. He’s gripped and deafened by her darkness, her softness. He’s then released for the second, final time.

OFF THE BUS

Dry lands have softened into lush. The driver stops the bus and most passengers rustle for their things, jerking suitcase handles into their bellies, and waddling forward.

Dean steps out and to the side, tugs at his stiff arms, and bends in half not knowing exactly what he’s doing. Then he reads over the cook’s instructions and palms the paper back into his pocket. He begins in the direction as explained and sees, after everyone has peeled off toward some small civilization, he’s left behind her. Tula continues to lead toward thick bush. His eyes are relaxed; the dark shoulders he memorized are now her body, the whole thing under shapeless clothes.

Before he sees her face for the first time – sees how her lips move and how the whites of her eyes slide down and sorrowful when she walks him through our death, he trails behind her across the dirt.

scrape scrapescrape scrape scrapescrape

She hears his steps on the offbeat scrape of her sandal:

scrape scrapescrape scrape scrapescrape

She stops:

scrape scrape scrape scrape

scrape scrape scrape

sccrrraaaape as Dean steps up to meet the other side of her head.

THE BUSH

They enter. Its thickness snaps back to test their commitment. It becomes sloppy but their efforts are shortly rewarded with a single rock in the middle of a clearing. It's large. When Dean lays his back along it, his hands clasped behind his head, the rock splays out wider and longer beneath him. Tula sits beside him reserved. They're quiet and not knowing how else to begin, they start where they first died.

TULA

I guess I can tell you about the pressure and panting on my neck. I remember it was wet and then I realized it passed through but I remained. I was existing but only behind a gasp. Then one day at the market I met the merchant. He was braiding a bracelet and without looking up he asked what it was I looking for. I told him I'd lost something important and hadn't slept. I told him I wasn't sure if I should look for it. He spoke calm and steadily, like he was humming his favorite song, and told me about this rock and the eldest woman. I bought a bus ticket that afternoon.

ME

The breath and pressure forced me out. I guess it's difficult to feel nothing and see her miss me. It's difficult not to miss the feeling of longing. She's so much closer to me now than since when I left.

DEAN:

Some people saw. I saw them not want to believe when I got up. They hesitated and then walked away offended by the burden of now having to delete the scene from their memory over their lifetime.

I never talked about it, not for months. Cheryl, that's my wife, noticed the distance and planned a date thinking it was her and our relationship. I felt bad for her. But there was nothing I could do; I existed a step away from the world in front of me.

She made reservations at this “exotic” African restaurant. So whatever, I went. And when I walked in, the world stopped. Everyone – the hostess, the server, the cooks, the one upper class African family actually dining – all of them fixated on me. Cheryl didn’t notice. We sat and I was deaf through the entire meal. As we were curbside hailing a cab to leave I lost it. I burst back through the entrance crashing glasses against loose forks. I darted about not sure where I was going, and then the cook came out. He pulled me by my shirt and into a back hallway. He kept his face close to mine and allowed me to heave air into it. I spat, ‘I know you know. I know you know what I’m missing. You know what I’m looking for!’ He just stared back at me then slowly loosened his grip on my shirt.

I walked back to the entrance I ran through, defeated. I walked away from all of them. From then on, concentration was impossible. My patients, my daughters, and my wife were nothing more than a fleshy obligation. I’d have dreams that it returned. Maybe they were nightmares. I’m not sure. And then there were parts of my skin that seared, so I finally went back to the restaurant.

It was maybe an hour before they opened and they were folding napkins. I was barely through the door when they all dropped what they were doing and swooped me up and through the back hallway into a tiny office. It was almost elegant, like a practiced dance.

They sat me down on a metal stool and packed in around me. Finally the wall of bodies broke and let the young cook through. He was probably older than he looked. He leaned low against the wall so he wasn’t too tall as I sat. He spoke direct and clear. Like your merchant, he told me about the eldest of ladies, the dry and then the lush, this fucking rock in the middle of it. None of it made sense. It was this rod he fed me and I swallowed it inch by inch through my ribs. It was painful but I never stopped swallowing. And then he was done. ‘Good luck,’ and said, which almost sounded joyful in his accent. I might have winced. We shook hands, he gave me a paper with instructions, and then the wall let him back through and out.

ME

They lay near each other for some time, their arm hairs wiggling from the coolness and their closeness. Then they sat up and continued on. As the young cook and merchant instructed, they eventually reach another clearing. The village is before them; it's stillness. They walk past a small campfire and spot an older man. He's sitting on a log tending to a goat and doesn't look up as they approach.

Then, "welcome back," he says.

###

"It's good to see you two again," the eldest of the ladies says. "It's rare we get a visit in the bush." They sit on the handmade porch of a plain handmade cabin. Dean and Tula don't speak waiting eagerly for more.

The eldest of the ladies waits as well. Then her face twists. She feels sorry for the two the way one would a just-born puppy. "You must know this not your first time, you two together," she scoffed behind a smile. "You've met, loved, warred, watched each other waste away in horror and then also in delight, passed each other only once, shared children – and it all, and I mean all of it, won't be the last. Ever. Fredrick over there orchestrated your latest request to have a baby." They quickly shoot their attention to Fredrick. He's still with his goat, agitated and fussing with it now. They turn back to the eldest of the ladies who can see they're frantic for more. She continues.

"*This* is slightly different. This is the first time you're both in the bush continuing to live" – ah, this is where she mentions me—"after they've left you. But I guess they'll find a way to bring you two together, as that's what you want, even for a moment."

"If that's what we want," Dean asks.

“Yes,” the eldest lady returns flatly. She sees their eyes wide and even more desperate. She continues casually. “Well there are the parts that no one knows. Me, the other ladies, Fredrick, the ones that stay inside you, all of us, we’re here, I guess we’re here as support. But it’s all you not me. Not us here. The deepest parts of yourself will reveal itself somehow. Make sense?”

With Fredrick in the lead, they step out of the cool and the still and tread back through the bush. The same route feels too easy now that they’re heading out. Dean is behind Tula and helps her crack away thicker brush. Now at the road Fredrick gives a nod toward a direction and then turns back leaving the two as they start their return back to the hot and the bright.