

Among the Stones

Thomas sat cross-legged in the meadow grass that was now high enough to ease the harsh edges of the cairn before him. There were green shoots poking tentative fingers from between the stones as well. Soon, this monument would only be visible when the winds of winter withered the growth of spring and summer.

At some point, it wouldn't be visible at all. It would be just another tiny rise in the landscape, overwritten by time and nature.

And what of the tiny bones beneath? Would they lose their power over him?

It was a question answered before the question occurred. Of course not. He would end before that happened.

So he came here at every opportunity. He would speak to his lost daughter, and say all the things he couldn't say anywhere else. He'd shed all the tears he had, but now his words were his sorrow.

"There are moments, my little one, my worst moments, when I want to shred what little good seems left to me. That would absolve me of the duty of hope. "

He wondered if these words could be a burden for a life already concluded. He wondered, but couldn't seem to care. Surely, beyond the veil, she was either far removed from his suffering, or was gifted the ability to carry it as weightless. Maybe it was just that he needed either of those to be true.

He knew he should return home, return to the emptiness that stretched between his wife and himself. As vast an expanse as it seemed to be, he understood that there were still end-points to it. They were the shores of a sea between, connected only by open water.

But connected all the same.

He thought to rise then and go, but the wind gusted, and the grass sighed with it. It was a deep exhalation, like many his daughter had made while asleep on his chest.

This thought left him multiple paths to follow, presented in retrograde.

His daughter, her breath growing shorter and labored as she neared the end.

His wife, blowing him a kiss as their little girl napped in his arms.

His own inability to breathe as he watched her being born.

All of them came with a special sort of pain, and he was so tired of every version. It was simple emotional math. Bad is bad, and good turns to bad. All the equal signs led to the same place.

He didn't always get this close when he was here, but today was one of those days.

He wanted to crawl through the gaps in the stones, wrap himself around what remained of his little girl, and slide down into where she was. He wanted to feel her arms around his neck, and hear the truncated versions of words she could say before she was robbed of the opportunity to get to full articulation.

He wanted to cease.

Then he heard her footsteps through the meadow. After a time, his wife stood behind him, and he felt her hand on his shoulder. He couldn't help it. His words were an accusation.

"You never come here."

She sighed, before she responded.

"My memories aren't here. I don't think of her here."

"I don't understand that."

"I know."

He thought that the anger would come then, the sea between them compressed into rage. But it didn't. It was only emptiness.

She moved her hand from his shoulder to the back of his neck, and up into his hair. It was gentle, and familiar. She made her plea.

"Come home."

In his head, he heard his daughter say,

"Bah-bye?"

He reached up and put his hand atop his wife's.

"How can it be home anymore?"

She took a moment to answer, and the emptiness expanded in the intervening time. But she did answer.

"Because I'm there, and I'm yours. And you are mine. *We* are what remains."

The emptiness didn't vanish, but it did diminish. He thought he could contain it within himself again, if only for now.

He let go of her hand, and got to his feet, turning away from the cairn.

She grasped his hand this time, and led him away.

The wind blew again, and the grass sighed.

For this small moment in time, he let it be just what it was.