

I Am

Managing my way around the overgrown grass was complex; blades entangled my ankles and braced me aback; was it a warning? They brushed against my calves, reaching for my knees. I let go of my judgment— it would be impossible to turn back at this point. I made my way forward, following the sound of rushing water. My feet danced from the roots protruding from the earth, walking a horizontal staircase. Coarse bark gathered water droplets in their crevices. It had rained the night before, the soil was moist and the tree branches were weighed with humidity. I chose to take the soles from my shoes and leave them behind; I could feel every life form embedded in the soil through the thin barrier of canvas between us.

Never have I felt so connected with this earth. There was something I knew about the way nature treated me, the reason I chose for her to be my final resting ground. How gentle her composition was; she held me on a pedestal, she created my body as a temple. This journey never felt fleeting from my routine, I was away from my bed, my car— my children, but I was as at home as I ever was. I found myself at the river's edge, the water rushing before me. It was narrow at my convenience, the water fled so swiftly, so organized. I abandoned my lifeless shoes, too worn to endure the river's rocky bottom.

The water was cool to touch, but inviting; so I began with my feet, checking the depths of this endeavor. My body submerged slowly, like entering a Jacuzzi tub as a small child. I felt no discomfort at all; it was peaceful, in fact. The waters laced my waist, tugging at my body subtly. I wanted to give in here, let my body go down the stream to find where it led me, but I knew better. It was my duty to follow through with this plan and commit to the path I chose. Crossing the river was empowering, how my frame could still hold against the elements. Even if I was a withering man, I was still resilient in my core.

The floor of the river was rough, small pebbles collected between my toes and under the arches of my feet. I saw small fresh water fish pass, a school of bluefish maneuvered around my legs; I felt their gentle scales brush against me. How strange it is, how overjoyed I am to be in contact with them. This reminded me how long it had been since I went swimming, or even to a forest. Was it moral for this to be my fate— to be surrounded with such beauty and not have it shared? I shook the idea from my conscious, I am here, I am present. My mind trailed off, *I am I am I am...*

I pondered this idea at the water's far edge. Was I to find not who I was, but what I *am*? I knew my identity as an individual, but the earth inspired the idea in me that I was much more than that. I grabbed the loose soil that bordered the grand body of water and pulled myself forward. My fingernails cupped a whole terrarium of soil, housing life as a

part of me. As I picked the earth out of my hands, I came across small sprouts of grasses unknown to me. I've found it most interesting how I could easily damage another being, but wanted to let the forces of nature take *me*. *Is it as easy for the earth to take out a man as it is for a man to take from the earth?* Easy or not, I was beginning to prepare for *that* time.

There was a heavy carpeting of leaves under my now bare feet. They stuck to my damp body, embracing me with their last hours of life. Trees lose millions of leaves a day and the earth loses millions of people in an equal measure of time; I think that answers my question, then. *Yes, it is as easy for a man to die as it is for a leaf to drop.* My clothing clung to me quite uncomfortably and I considered it a sign to strip (no pun intended) myself of most of my worldly possessions. Now, nearly nude in a forest I realized how ridiculous this situation would have seemed to me years before. I am proud of the journey that brought me to this day. I could only imagine the headlines once I'm discovered: *"Body of Local Man Found Nude in the Rural Forests of Central Florida."* But I did not want to think about that, another worldly thing.

I progressed past the riverbank to the lush forest. The sun was already lowering, I had no idea what time it was, possibly seven in the afternoon. I left the watch with the map and compass, a last minute decision. Before dusk I thought it would be urgent to find somewhere I could settle. The caw of vultures shook my bones; they flew in a cyclic motion ahead of me. A sadistic feeling of foreshadowing fell over me, but I could only laugh. I laughed for a good while, it seemed appropriate. Countless questions still clouded my thoughts, I felt the guilt settle on my shoulders and grew exhausted of thinking. The incessant caws over me grew under my skin and I started to doubt my decisions.

But then, in a moment of genuine serendipity, I came across a clearing. Confused, I halted and searched for something that had to be here. I didn't know what I was searching for to be honest; I was questioning whether I had lost my mind already. I walked forward, looking down at my feet; I walked in circles, still looking at the floor. The soil was so unusually dry; there was also no vegetation at my feet. Then I came across it, the largest peepal tree stood before me, rising meters above my head. The branches extended like arms, a plethora of trustful arms to welcome me.

I had found my sanctuary at last; I embraced the tree and thanked the universe for catering such a gorgeous place for my resting. Tears of gratitude streamed down my flushed cheeks into the tangles of my beard as I approached the tree. I examined her, how mystic she was. I estimated her bark had a thirty-foot circumference; she has probably endured at least a century of living in this forest. I kissed the bark like a madman. Giddy with appreciation, I began to venture to the branches, they were nearly horizontal in some places and held a perfect home to rest my tired body. The bark was not rough like an elm or oak, but smooth almost as a banyan would be.

The sunlight fled my presence, but the stars paid their gratitude. The most extraordinary display of lights stood before me; the moon smiled in admiration to her children, the celestial family watched over me. A breeze picked up and I began to regret leaving my clothing, but the leaves applauded my resilience. The way branches move in the wind has always lulled me in a way the earth only could. Leaves danced down—spiraling from the canopy and waltzing with the wind. The serenity coddled me and sent me adrift into heavy yawns, following the deepest of slumbers.

I awoke at some point of the morning before the sun had fully risen, surprised to still be draped over the peepal branch. I sat up; my temples throbbed with such heaviness. Steadying myself, I decided to go to the ground level and ventured toward the bottom of the tree. I gently walked off the roots like step stones and sunk my feet in the soil. The forest was still dark, but the peak of sunlight had settled at the horizon. I felt the aches travel from my heads to the backs of my legs and the areas under my arms. The pain radiated in me and I doubled over in a silent agony. I knew today would be the day. I knew my death would be quick, I would not starve or become ill; I purposely had not taken my medication that maintained my body, despite the illness that ate away my heart. I felt it would be coming over me soon; the palpitations shook me.

I leaned my sore body against the bark of the tree and settled on its raised roots. My breathing was shallow and strenuous. I looked up and watched the sun appear through the canopy over me, I steadied my breath and collected myself. *Not now, there is too much to resolve.* The guilt I have been avoiding came over me once again, I could no longer wave it past me, and I was too weak, it was too important.

I tried to reason why I would leave my family as I did. *Would my children understand?* I could no longer have them visit me with their pitiful eyes on me, speaking polite fibs of the future— they knew I had no hope, though. I was diagnosed with heart disease at the age of fifty-six and have done well for five years, but one knows when it is their time. I'm not sure if I did this for myself or for them, it dug an abyss in my stomach. Being helpless isn't an option; I decided I would not linger around in a hospital bed, waiting for my death. I'm sure this was better than dying when they came to visit, I couldn't have them see another parent die... I just can't do that to them. To see your child go through pain is a different type of pain inflicted on you, mirrored and almost amplified. Though, I still felt my reasons *were* selfish and it left shame in my mouth.

My breathing became labored again. I clenched my chest; tears ran off the tip of my nose into my lap. *Was there a reason that man was more resilient in nature? Was having an ego necessary to the chain of life?* The thought hurt me just as much. *Was I as connected in nature as I thought I was?*

My pain became numbing and I was left with my thoughts alone. I leaned back against the tree and gasped quietly. I heard the vulture's caw and cringed, remembering their cyclic movements. Vultures could kill nature purposefully but it was justified; was the damage I've done equally as justified in the perspective of human nature? *Could having an identity, an ego, be justifiable in nature?* I looked up at the peepal tree and embraced how connected I could feel to the earth.

I am a human, a part of nature, just as the trees, the stars and the birds. I consume to produce life, even if it is only my own life. The burdens lifted from my shoulders and I began to lighten, the conflict had fled, the sun embraced my skin. *Like all, I am man, a mere visitor of this earth.*