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THE END OF SOMETHING

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This painting speaks to the beginnings of the universe as told through the lens of the Kumulipo, the Native Hawaiian procreation chant. This chant teaches that all beings trace their origins to a common root—pō, or endless darkness. Though the story eventually carries us into the realm of light, it is only by beginning in darkness that life can form. Given the state of our world today, perhaps pō is preparing for rebirth once more.

—Lehuauakea Fernandez

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THE END OF SOMETHING

BRANDON R. SCHRAND

On the second night, the crew rolled in a bank of floodlights to blaze the shoreline, and another high beam to sweep the dark surface of Alexander Reservoir, the large caterpillar-shaped body of water at the edge of Soda Springs, Idaho, my hometown. It was July 1989, I was sixteen going on seventeen, and, like everyone else in town, I had been upended by the story. Chad and I were watching from his truck at the reservoir's edge on the opposite side of the action, smoking Marlboros and listening to Rock 103 out of Salt Lake City on low volume. The sky was an obsidian dome and you could only see the stars and moon in the intervals between the sweeping high beams bright on the black water. Search boats trolled back and forth with their throaty motors churning in the deep dark. Crackly radio chatter carried across the water as if transmitted from another time. Farther down the shoreline, dogs barked in the damp distance and we could see flashlights wiggle in the dark. Lured by the spectacle, trout broke the water's surface, trying to feed on the lights and the moon.

We were parked in a gravelly turnaround spot at the dead-end of Second Bridge Road named for the bridge that was no longer there. A barbed wire fence and some faded yellow "Bridge Out" signs peppered with gunfire marked the termination point of the road. Beyond the fence, the old route ran along a rocky pier that jutted out into the reservoir like a long bent finger, and was overrun with June grass and stinging nettle. It was an overgrown ruin, a defunct stretch of abandoned road bejeweled with broken bottle glass and sun-shot beer cans. Beyond the weedy fringe, the road lopped off at the water twelve feet below where driftwood gathered among the green stones. When Second Bridge had fallen into disuse, creaking beneath its rusted rigging and lazing on its derelict pylons, the town closed it off. Rather than dismantling the structure and salvaging it for scrap, they just cut it off at either end and sunk the whole thing into the reservoir like a defeated galleon.

A narrow footpath led from the gravel dead-end spot where we were parked, and followed the south shoreline at the base of a nearly vertical mountain that was dark with stony cliffs and towering ponderosas. The path was soft with pine needles and gained altitude the farther you walked so that if you slipped off the rooty, earthen embankment, you'd fall ten to twelve feet straight down to a white band of sharp rocks below. Craggy cliffs freckled with orange and black lichens and busy with swallows and swifts, loomed high above, shadowy and strangely foreboding. Eventually, the footpath widened into a steep clearing where a thick rope swing hung from an outstretched ponderosa that leaned improbably out over the green water. If you grew up in Soda Springs and could swim, you burned through most of your summer days out at The Rope Swing. At the east end of the reservoir near the hospital's shadow, it was marshy and tined with reeds and you could often see a dance of sandhill cranes preening and foraging for dragonflies, snails, and marsh roots. Pelicans were a constant show on the open water. On the reservoir's west end, there stood a powerhouse atop the Bear River dam. Completed in the mid-1920s, the white cement building was a mix of the old and the new, an architectural hybrid of gothic sensibility yielding to modern utility. It was a relic with a green roof and two-story narrow windows that looked black and bereft between the pillar-like buttresses that arrowed up past the roofline. Maybe because we had always been told to stay away from the dam, or maybe because I'd heard the stories of how many men died building it, I always thought the powerhouse and its row of dark and narrow windows looked eerie, more like a mausoleum than a dynamo.

Chad and I weren't exactly close friends, which is why I find it strange even now that I was with him that night watching the search. For one thing, he was a year ahead of me in high

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school, and for another, he was something of an all-around jock, where I was not. Often bedecked in camouflage, Chad wore wavy, sandy hair, a galaxy of freckles, and a champion smile he coasted on with a confidence that seemed more genetic than learned. I had almost no confidence at all which added up to another difference. His mother worked for my family at our café in town, and so that may have explained, in part, why I was palling around with Chad that night. Barring his mother's employment, however, we had little in common. Like his father—a redheaded swashbuckling day laborer—Chad was an avid hunter. I'd only been hunting a few times but never killed anything. My heart, you might say, just wasn't in it the way it was with almost every other guy in town. But girls liked Chad and he was kind. And for some reason, I think his kindness, more than anything, explained why I was hanging out with him on that July night when everyone in Soda Springs was grim-faced and quiet.

While the summer air blew through the cab of the truck, Chad and I split a twelve-pack of Coors Light. The night air smelled sweet from the Russian olive trees and the apron of barley fields that riffled outward from the north side of the reservoir, but it smelled dank and mossy, too, from the water. Every now and then, however, when the breeze blew just so, the scent of fish-rot would steal up like the briefest of phantoms and rob me of my breath. The interior of the cab pulsed in a carnival of color from Chad's stereo and equalizer. He had one of those yellow pine-tree-shaped air fresheners so the air smelled like vanilla, too, and cigarette smoke, and the competing colognes we were both wearing.

Chad's truck was like all the trucks guys like him drove in Soda Springs at the end of the 1980s. It was a late-model 1960s Chevy. It was green with blacked-out windows and shiny mag wheels, and it was tidy with new paint and an engine so clean it could have been in a magazine. On any given night, a procession of these Chevy trucks dragged the town's main thoroughfare with their black tinted windows and purring motors, a parade of overwrought masculinity on most of those nights, but slow and sepulchral on that one night in July.

The only time Chad turned up the radio is when "Angie" by the Rolling Stones came on. The song had a quickening effect on him, something I hadn't anticipated. He went on and on about how much he loved the song, how it was easily their best track, and then cajoled me into agreement. And so I agreed that it was their best song ever, hands down, even though I had never heard it before that night. We talked about how everyone else cited "Sympathy or "Paint it Black" or "Brown Sugar" as the Stones' triumphal songs, and how no one ever singled out "Angie," how no one ever gave it enough credit. "Best breakup song there is," he had said. And that's when I remembered that he had, until recently, been dating this freshman girl at school named, Angie. She was my best friend's cousin but never offered me so much as a hello, so I didn't know her. Chad flicked his cigarette into the dark and sang along. His voice, I remember, was surprisingly good. That was something else I hadn't anticipated—that Chad, the hulking hunter and jock, was a good singer. While he crooned along with Mick and closed his eyes when his favorite parts rose up, I sipped from my beer and tried to act normal. Normal because we weren't that close, and normal because I wanted him to think I was cool even if I wasn't. Normal because nothing was normal that night with the search on and with the lights sweeping back and forth across the dark water, and with so many questions unanswered. But soon, the song faded out and Chad turned Rock 103 back down to low volume.

With the alcohol warm in our veins, our conversation eased and became nimbler, yet remained quiet and solemn enough for church. We could hear once more the search crew's radio static and transmissions drifting across the dark water. I listened hard trying to channel the distant voices, to divine what it was they were saying, but the chatter was strangely foreign. The voices seemed remote and close at the same time. If pressed, I could have told you the language was likely English, but I couldn't have told you what they were saying. It was as if theirs were the voices of the future broadcasting backward to warn us of something. Try as I might, I discerned nothing that would have enlarged my understanding of what had happened and why.

Like everyone else in town, I knew only the rough outlines of the story. The rest I gleaned from confided whispers and the rural rite of elegiac rumor. Anthony, who was seventeen, had been out swimming with his sister and friends. "At Second Bridge," people said. This was local shorthand for swimming across the channel that the old, sunken bridge used to span. From one side to the other, it's about seventy-five yards, give or take, and because Alexander is a reservoir built on the Bear River, you have to swim across the river's current to reach the other side. Anthony's sister and friends navigated the

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current safely, but Anthony did not. That was Wednesday. The problem then became a matter of finding the body, a phase of the search the crew called "recovery."

So much of what Chad and I talked about that night is unremembered. But I do remember how our voices grew reverent, self-consciously so, as we spoke of Anthony. He and Chad played on our high school basketball team, and they had lived in the same neighborhood, so Chad knew Anthony far better than I had known him. I recall talking at length about how good Anthony was, and that he was more than just a good kid. He was a good human. But our righteous praise wasn't merely borne out of the tradition of respect for the deceased, as that kind of talk is wont to be. Righteousness came easy to our nicotine lips and beery breath because he really was that good. Blond-haired and handsome, Anthony was the impossible boy: a devoted Mormon who excelled in school and sports and Scouts. Anthony was, by all accounts, the unblemished son. He was, in other words, everything I was not and would never be. And now he was gone.

It was as if theirs were the voices of the future broadcasting backward to warn us of something.

The Alexander Reservoir is a font of the forgotten. Its green waters have given and taken away. How many times have I flung my near-naked body into its emerald depths, and how many times have I escaped? How many times have I boated over its chop, and how many fishing lines have I cast upon its waters? And what stories does it hold entombed? There was, I came to learn, another boy—Dewey Gardner, also seventeen—who, on May 24, 1931, vanished near Second Bridge. "The youth's cap was found on the raft by searchers but no trace of the body was found," one paper noted. Something about that image—his hat, which for some reason I imagine as red, floating on his solitary raft—haunts me. In January 1942, local beautician, Grace Coppard, shot and killed Paul Tipton, a mechanic, and dumped his body in the reservoir. In the summer of 1945, Sergeant Kenneth Moreland, home from the war, fell out of a rowboat near the powerhouse and drowned immediately. In 1976, engineers drained the reservoir to repair cracks in the dam. On parting its waters, they were astonished to find a small, steam-powered train fully intact sitting on a circular track, with coal still heaped in the locomotive's tender car. For a half-century, the train sat underwater unknown, unseen, doomed, and bound for nowhere. One year after the discovery, another seventeen year old, Jay Stevens, drowned when his canoe capsized near Second Bridge. If I am to acknowledge that these memorials comprise only a fraction of the stories the Alexander holds, then I must acknowledge too that every small town with a lake at its edge has suffered similar fates. And yet, we are drawn to the water time and again like so many parishioners called to Sunday service. But that's how I see things now, not as I saw things then—that night when the floodlights carved out the darkness in vain.

Unlike Anthony, I was a lapsed Boy Scout but I still received my copy of *Boy's Life* in the mail, and early on, I read it like scripture. Every time a new issue arrived, I would flip toward the back of the magazine to read my favorite section, "Scouts in Action." A comic-strip derived from true stories of Scouts performing heroic deeds, "Scouts in Action" threw me into vivid bouts of daydreaming wherein I was the hero of the tale, rescuing a hiker pinned beneath a felled pine, say, or saving a lost camper from hypothermia. Even preventing someone like Anthony from drowning in a mountain lake. I'd moon over the illustrations, studying how these heroic boys—kids unlike me—applied splints, fashioned tourniquets, or converted trousers into flotation vests. As I grew older, however, I began to avoid *Boy's Life* for the same reasons, perhaps, that those of wavering faith avoid the Bible: it was a clear reminder of how I didn't measure up.

Sitting in Chad's truck watching the recovery effort, we would have only been nominally aware of the ambient tangerine light that fell upon the dark waters every thirty minutes. In Soda Springs, Idaho, the night sky turns a fiery reddish-orange each time Monsanto dumps an enormous pot of molten, radioactive slag down its mountain of slate-gray tailings north of town. It is the fully unnatural equivalent of a volcanic sky that burns red every half-hour. To Chad and me, however, and to everyone else in that town, this spectacle was no more remarkable than the current of the Bear River that had swept Anthony to his doom, or the brief of pelicans impervious to the current's draw. The radioactive slag, like the river current and the springs and the sunken bridge, was just there, another fact of the place we had to survive. Unless we couldn't.

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I don't remember how long we spent at the dead end of Second Bridge Road waiting for the crew to exhume Anthony's body from the turgid depths. I remember relieving myself out in the brittle tallgrass along the fray and how the slag made the Alexander look like a small red sea. I remember growing tired, too. And I remember giving up and talking about how the search party would have a better chance of finding his body the following day.

But the following day came and went, and still there was no body. People in town grew quieter, caught in that unbearable place between death and mourning. The nightly procession of Chevy trucks with blacked-out windows seemed to slow. When speaking of Anthony, friends and family struggled to properly conjugate their verbs to the past tense. Customers in our café issued updates along with gossip and news. Local Scout groups including my old pack volunteered to help. The Caribou County Search & Rescue team mobilized. Additional dive teams arrived from larger cities—Pocatello and Salt Lake—to assist in the recovery. It was all hands on deck to find Anthony. The search had been difficult. The river current had been a problem, but the most daunting challenge was the water itself. The Alexander was so polluted and so thick with silt and organic matter that divers could scarcely see their hands before their faces. This is why the water looked so green during the day, and so dark at night when the moon and slag-glow shone upon its surface.

In those gut-sunk days of unknowing, when Anthony's body was still missing, and when everyone in town lay on their pillows at night wondering, I found myself increasingly unsettled by his death in ways I could not have foreseen. Like everyone else, I tried to realign myself to the peculiar machinations of normal life in Soda Springs, Idaho. Every thirty minutes, Monsanto slopped its molten refuse over the brink. Every night at 10:00, the three traffic lights in town switched to blinking mode. And every half-hour, the semaphore in the center of town flashed its red lights and rang its incessant bells for the elsewhere-bound train. The ceaselessness of it all was maddening somehow, even though I was old enough to know from experience that caskets come in small sizes. But Anthony's casket would be adult-sized, which itself felt wrong.

More than anything, however, even more than the shock of his sudden and irrevocable absence, I was haunted by the hows of his death. After Chad and I had watched the search, my thoughts at night had shifted from whatever flights they followed to the horrors of drowning. The panic and the helplessness. That black fear that hits as soon as the green water fills you up. The final seconds of a young life before the sinking. But there was something else that bothered me then. Anthony was an athlete and a Scout. If anyone had been destined to star as a "Scout in Action" in the pages of *Boy's Life*, it was Anthony. He should have been the one doing the rescuing, and not the drowning. The whole thing was backwards. Then, on other nights, I would imagine myself there at the edge of Second Bridge, with him, and I would wonder: could I have saved him? Could I have been the Scout in Action I had always dreamed about? Could I have summoned enough strength and levelheadedness to dive in at the first sight of trouble and safely haul him to shore? The answer to my dying shame was no. I wouldn't have had the strength or skill or courage, frankly, to save him. I would have killed us both. How strange it was to obsess over the death of a kid I barely knew. How strange to hate myself for a life I couldn't have saved.

Almost a week had passed. The dive team had been painstakingly searching the trusses and metalwork of Second Bridge, sunken to the muddy floor of the reservoir. I tried to imagine the abandoned relic and its twisted rigging—green and carpeted with moss—submerged and once forgotten, but now inexplicably remembered. As the team advanced their search grid along the length of the iron ruin, one of the divers turned just right so that Anthony's face—just inches away from his own—suddenly lit up pale and dead in the cocoon of deep-water halogen light like a beacon in the green dark murk. "His eyes were open when they found him," people said. "It was like he was staring right at the diver." Anthony's lifeless body had been stuck beneath one of the bridge's trusses for all those days and nights. That image of his pale face in the green water and his body snagged up in the bridge are images that stay with me still, all these years later.

After the funeral, the town returned to whatever normal was normal then. It was the final sigh of summer in the final months of the 1980s. Kids met at The Rope Swing and Tarzanned out over the Alexander, and families boated its length, leaving dark wakes behind them. Couples picnicked on the shores while pelicans bobbed in the waves. Old men chummed trout and cast their lines out in hopes of a strike. Inevitably, though, school started. I was a junior and had finally turned seventeen. Chad was a senior and on the basketball team. The one and only time we ever hung out was that night during the search in his truck at the edge of the reservoir with the bright lights sweeping back and forth. After that, we never talked again. About Anthony. About anything.

Soon, the aspen leaves began to yellow on the white trees up in the hills and you could smell woodsmoke in the air. The sky still turned orange at night, and the river flowed ceaselessly through the Alexander.

Shortly before I graduated, I drove out to the turn-around spot at Second Bridge. The sky was a dusky orange as evening gathered over the reservoir. At the water's edge I was alone. I could smell the sweet stench of aquatic life and hear the water slap the green stones on the shore. Swallows and swifts knifed through the dark ponderosas, while water birds drifted white on the emerald water out beyond the current where Anthony had been. I could hear the crickets ratcheting in the air and the iron dirge of a freight train. I was eighteen, elsewhere-bound myself, and knew somehow right then and there—like I'd always known, like a congregant knows god once again, perhaps—that I would never come back, not really. Not even once more. ●

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