Moss

 The roar of the waterfall is the only sound.
 \*
 “You are god.”
 The boy frowns down at the reflection of the man in the water, considering him. Moss, slender and bearded, consisting of almost nothing. Moss, calm, stable, dispassionate. Moss pulls himself forward, his paddle hardly making ripple as it’s slid through the water. He speaks again.
 “You are god. The world reflects you.”
 He has the quiet voice of someone who has been in the wilderness for a long time, where the vast forest and sky, and the dark mosses eagerly consume voices. He considers moss’s movement. So assuredly he moves. As if the only reason anything had ever existed was so that moss could paddle on this river and in this moment and he engaged in his paddling knowing that.
 Morinner couldn’t move with such certainty anymore. Not after all that had happened. Not all after those things he’d done. Not after his mother would cry at the sight of him, out of shock and out of hurt, out of hatred and confliction. Lamenting, between gasps of air, the son she thought she’d known. Not after he’d sobbed alone, consumed by guilt, shaking with it, eyes and nose dripping with it. He’d taken his punishment upon himself to prove he was sorry. Not after those nights, few and far between, when they had hugged each other for long stretches, both of them crying softly, neither wishing to pull back and reveal it. Morinner had become still after that. Like a person sitting alone who suddenly becomes aware of the silence surrounding them becomes scared to disturb it. And he’d remained still until he’d almost forgotten, how to move.

 All the others are packed into tents but Morinner is under the tarp stretching. The sound of rainfall insulates his thoughts. He judges the time of his stretches by the number of times the water pools in and splashes off the tarp. He has his hand on a tree and is twisting away from it. He can feel an acute tightness in a few strands of muscle as they’re pulled around the joint. It is so tight he can only hold the stretch for a few breaths. His eyes open and his focus lands on his hands.
 “*These hands, what have these hands done?”* He knows what they have done. He sees the familiar scars that flash before him thousands of times a day with each paddle stroke. And each scar horrifies him.
 “*How can any good ever be done with these hands?”* hopeless.
 “Continue.”

 Morinner twists his head around and glimpses Moss sitting across the fire, his shape distorted by the heat.
 “Accept that you will feel this pain for now.”
 The man appeared to be waiting for Morinner to do what he said, so Morinner twists into the stretch and feels that sharp tug, almost too sensitive to bear.
 “Hold it, care for it, and it may heal. Push it too far and it may break.”
 Stretching, Morinner fills his mind with attention on the knife in his chest. After four searing cycles of water filling and falling, he feels it slowly begin to release and to dissipate.

 The sweaty boys come out of the forest into the late afternoon sun that sits about two fingers above the horizon. They drop their food packs and boats from their weary backs. The consensus that they need a swim is quickly reached. A foot on a root, a hop over a small pool, two feet bouncing off the stone into the drawn out hang time and finally the impact. He couldn’t help it; he was overjoyed with the cold water on his naked body. They make a game of running off the cliff and trying to catch stones in the air.
 He is just crawling out of the water when suddenly one of the girls appears naked overhead, screaming through the air. He clambers over the edge of the cliff and sees the other girls standing there. He stops, frozen, staring greedily at their nakedness. His are eyes bats, darting around trying to take in as much as possible. But then they finally catch a face glaring back at him; the crouched, silent figure at the edge of the cliff. And in that look all his wrongdoing was relived. He turns his face to the water so no one can see it twist up and convulse into something wretched, not something ever used to convey any emotion, this form is outside of his control, like the spasm of an over used muscle. He slips off the cliff through space and into the dark pool of water, wishing to disappear. Once under the surface he compresses himself, squeezes all the air out of his chest in a harrowing yell. It is a yell of hatred at himself for what he’d done, it is a wish to destroy what he’d become. Empty, he sinks. His tightened muscles long for air, his throat swallows compulsively. He hits rock bottom. He thinks of the odious smile he wore only a minute earlier.
 *“You don’t deserve it.”* His lungs flutter and flex uncontrollably as they try and pull air through his tight mouth. They overpower him and pull water into his nose, some going down his throat. Panic takes him and his eyes split open in search of the light of the air and sky. With a burst of adrenaline he shoots off towards the surface and wheezes air into his damaged lungs. The air is so pure in this northern place.
 “*You don’t deserve it. No you don’t deserve it.”* He reaches the shore away from the others playing a game in the water. He casts his eyes momentarily towards the sun and barely glimpses Moss’s figure. He holds his breath, barely supressing a cough so the man won’t see it and worry for him.He scrambles through the brush of the shoreline but has to stop to cough up water. He keeps going now, grabbing trees as he moves without direction. He is filled with dread, he must get away from the others before it hits.
 *“No not again, don’t make me go there”* He reaches another part of the long twisting river, right above the falls they were supposed to pass by the next day. Then it happens, he is in that small place with his demons. He rips his experiences out of the past and uses his guilt as a weapon to bludgeon himself. He beats himself with images of crying faces and other, more abhorrent things. The dirt and dry leaves stick to his wet body. The tears come. He is broken.
 “Imagine,” said a voice, gentle enough not to startle him in his delicate state.
Morinner hearing it wonders how long Moss had been there, over his naked body.
“Imagine a child whose parent saw only its insufficiencies, always found some facet in the child to accuse of inadequacy. No matter how the child attempted to impress its parent, it was met with contempt. After some time the child would give itself up. Allow itself to become that negative thing the parent thought it was. Because what would be the point in trying anyway? That is why you cannot continue on this way of punishment, or you will end up with even more to be punished for.”
 “*But my debt is too huge! What can be done to repay such a debt? It is impossible, and so I must suffer as I have made others do. Nothing can balance the scales.”* “The weight of your injustice is great, but there are deeds to be done that can lift it into the air.”
 *“If there is, show me them, please. Show me how to move again. Help me, Moss. Please moss I have nothing, there is no person left in this monster.”*
 The roar of the waterfall is the only sound.
 “*Moss please get me out of here, show me the way. How can I balance the scales? Moss?”* He finally raises his heavy head and through the blur of tears sees moss at the water edge, sees him begin to lean over the water. In a second Morinner is on his feet sprinting towards the man who seemed to be falling in slow motion. Morinner hurdles past moss, simultaneously flinging Moss back to shore and launching himself into the rush of water. He swims upstream in a frenzy, gaining almost no ground for an exhausting few seconds, until he finally realizes he has been saved. He floats onto his back, rejoicing in his freedom, and in the split second before he goes over the falls, he smiles.

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