

# Cracking Open

A walk to the precipice

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I

You are sitting on a couch, pen in hand, drawing the figure of a towering rickety creature held up by stilts. There is a man beneath the rickety creature, and a tree next to him that looks withered and dying. You hesitate before you start to add colour with your markers. You fear that you will mess it up. You do it anyway.

The next day another drawing starts to form. An elephant is being held up by hundreds of people. And the people are standing on a piece of earth that has been ripped away from its homeland. Metal tubes extend like legs beneath the chunk of earth, walking the people and the elephant across a big expanse of water. Nearby, a person is floating on a raft made out of reeds and bamboo. You pause again before you colour this one in. You contemplate if you will mess it up. You do it anyway.

The ashtray beside you swells with cigarette butts. You smoke the pot your boyfriend grows out of your bedroom closet. You write a paper about the Kosovo situation. Today bombs have begun dropping on Iraq.

You go to the streets. You link arms at the front of a march. Police officers have tape covering their badge numbers. 800 of you are yanked and slopped into paddy wagons. Your pocketknife cuts the plastic bands off wrists as bodies get crammed in. One is a legal observer who gathers everyone's names and phone numbers. She assigns each of you a jail buddy. We are not to leave the jail until we are sure our buddy is out.

The next day, your boyfriend bails you out with your money – he later keeps that money for himself when your felony charge for mob action is dropped. You feel regret, but it's not about any of that. It's about your assigned jail buddy. You didn't see her during booking. And she wasn't in your cell. But that doesn't bother you then. It's when you leave the jail cell that the regret starts. You sign papers and hug your boyfriend's awkward shame. You don't remember to ask the status of your jail buddy before your boyfriend pulls your hand out of the building and the rest of you follows. You let him steer you away from the group of solidarity protesters pounding on five-gallon drums. You don't speak up. You blankly follow him. You feel numb.

Your boyfriend tells you that marching in the streets is stupid. He with his dreadlocks and his friends in their crisp tie-dyed T-shirts change the conversation whenever you speak. They tell you you're a downer. You know you are. You hear them from the other room say that they'd want a girlfriend who could just hang out. You don't fit in this world, but you can't seem to leave it. You take a handful of pills every morning and every night. Zoloft, lithium, Lamictal, Risperdal. You feverishly underline sections of text for your American foreign policy class. You become silent and panicked in social situations, but outspoken in classrooms. Plato's *Republic* is the source code of the problem. Communism and capitalism are the same coin with two different heads. You point at the *Communist Manifesto* and Milton Friedman's free market zeal, but classmates are not seeing what you think you see: the rickety towering Dreadnought and Lele the elephant, doubled and reflected.

The drawings are changing something inside you.

You want to be the rafter. You want to put down your stake and walk out from underneath the elephant, but you know it will cause the others to carry more weight. You wonder about ways for everyone to run out at the same time, where no one gets crushed. One, two, three: run! In all your imagined simulations, someone always ends up with only their hands making it out, the rest of their body trapped beneath the collapsed elephant.

And then there's the man standing next to the dying tree who tells everyone to get out of the teetering structure of the Dreadnought. It's going to fall over. Go, go! But no one can hear him over the clatter of sound. You know you're already that man. You daydream of urban food sovereignty plans – industrial warehouses converted to hydroponics. You realise you know nothing about growing food and you put down your pen. You know that when the Dreadnought falls over, like it has in the past, the people will just build it up again. And again. Ad infinitum. You hope that this man will figure out the riddle that will help bring an end to Dreadnought and Lele. But this man has lost all his colour and all that is left of him is black lines and white spaces and he is saying to you 'I cannot *be* here.' And you tell him that *that* is exactly *why* he is there

– that being uncomfortable with being there is crucial to understanding the riddle. And you tell yourself the same thing, because that’s what you need to hear to keep yourself alive a little bit longer.

You stop taking your meds, gradually this time. And you leave that boyfriend.

You don’t know it yet, but in a year, you will drink sweet sherry each morning when you get out of bed and each night you will hazily go to sleep in sheets hiding cat poop and litter.

And the next year you will drop out of college and hop on freight trains to the southern Appalachians with a boy who has the same small body as the rafter. You will learn to forage wild foods and supplement from dumpsters. And sleep in a tarp with a wool blanket and one change of clothes, a hatchet, one pot. Every morning you will give offerings to a spring as you gather your water and every night you will whisper gratitude to the moon. Years will go by like this. And for this first time in your young adult life, you will feel joy.

## II

My heart is beating so fast that my hands are trembling. I put them under myself and lean back into the corner of the boxcar. I look over at Jayden. The skin of his face is stretching backwards in fear. A flashlight’s searching spotlight is getting closer. Now it’s shining around our empty boxcar. I hold my breath. I hear the crunch of boots walking on the gravel. Away. My chest fills with a big breath and my body releases a little. Orange lights continue to blink over the road-crossing up ahead.

After far too long, the train starts jerking and my head bangs uncomfortably on the metal wall. There’s a clamour of noise as cars hit against each other, and now we’re starting to move. I don’t dare scoot out of that corner until we’ve passed the road intersection. I look at Jayden next to me. Wide-eyed, I can tell that he agrees.

Two weeks, and we finally get down into the south-east. Mosquitoes terrorise us while we are riding in the small landing of a wheat car, so we jump off during one of its long stops. We walk into a town and Jayden buys me my first chicken-fried steak. Welcome to Arkansas.

Hitchhiking gets us to northern Georgia. Jayden is showing me leaf patterns along the way, petal formations. But nothing is sticking for me. Not yet.

Is this a violet? I ask.

No, no, pick that leaf and hold onto it. I’ll show you one so you can see the difference.

Palmate leaves, cordate leaves. Alternate leaves, opposite leaves. Compound flowers. Simple flowers. Count the petals. Note the colours. Look at the book.

One book grows into two. Three. A dozen. Field guides and other books. *Hiroshima*. *Peterson's Field Guide to Wild Edible Plants*. *Peterson's Guide to Medicinal Plants*. *Gathering Moss*. *The Invisible Man*. One pack becomes just for books, a bag of rice, a jar of peanut butter. The heaviest pack.

Luckily my pack holds the lighter things, the wool blanket, tarp, cooking pot, hatchet, warm layers.

One month. Six months. Three years. The blur of green becomes filled with discreet forms. Some with their own names. Most are known unknowns. All the plants are separate from me, until one isn't.

A few months in, on an autumn evening, while Jayden is making a fire, I am digging up a wild potato-like tuber for dinner. Solomon's Seal.

Instead of breaking off a piece of root like I normally do, I feel an urge to excavate around the entire tuber, like an archaeologist uncovering an ancient city.

My hands and the digging stick gently prod and uncover the soil. I follow the root to the right. And then left. Now forking. Further and further; handfuls of soil pile up nearby, as the tuber appears to elongate and fork again. Periodically a stem with pendant white bell flowers rises up from a section of tuber.

After some time, I recognise that a dozen plants are all connected by the same puzzle-shaped root mass. A Celtic knot embedded in the dark soil horizon with singular explosions of flowering stems. I whisper a thank you and hesitantly break off a small section on an axillary branch and cover them back up.

Before I go to cook the root up for dinner, I sit back on my heels, wondering if the urge to follow the tuber was simple curiosity, or if the plant was speaking through my imagination – as if my imagination was not only mine, but an instrument that can be played by many different musicians, some with leaves and stems.

I bring the section of tuber up to the fire and tell Jayden about the interlocking network of roots. He asks why I wanted to follow the roots underground.

I want to say how maybe our imaginations aren't so separate from the world around us. That maybe consciousness isn't limited to animals with brains, or even beings with DNA.

I shrug and say, I don't know. I focus on scrubbing the dirt off the root. I imagine scrubbing off the feeling of insanity that's clinging to me, and I feel something whole beneath it.

### III

At the centre of all time, where the spokes of the bicycle wheel originate, there is a teetering, towering figure called the Dreadnought. No-one is sure whether the Dreadnought named himself, or if the people who create and grow and climb this towering structure are the ones who named him. But that is his name.

Dread not the Dreadnought, the people say. For the wisdom is within the word.

Not too far away is an elephant. A very large elephant. When the elephant was young and small, people loved the elephant. Glorified the elephant. The people began carrying the elephant so that it would be with them always. The elephant became the guiding principle of their people.

The elephant got bigger, like all elephants do, and the people had to capture other people to help carry its increasing weight. They kidnapped children, burned villages. Every time they did, more people came to carry it. Now there are lots of people to help carry Lele, the grand old elephant.

The centre of time has been like this for many turns of the wheel. Change does not happen to the centre of time very often, and when it does happen, it is very slow. One year at the centre of time is a thousand years on the rim of the wheel.

But the rim is where the interesting stories take place, where the changes to the centre are made, and where we will go.

Throughout history, some people awaken to the patterns of horror happening on the rim and find themselves navigating towards the centre – only to find Dreadnought and Lele and know not what to do. Some try, and fail, to bring the towering creatures down. Others fruitlessly try to cut a spoke of the wheel to liberate themselves and their people from it. While many others, screaming in desperation, jump off the wheel entirely.

Until this time known as now, when a certain happening is beginning.

The centre of time doesn't know about it yet, for the people there do not see the rest of the wheel. But the people on the rim of the wheel; their eyes are becoming bi-directional. They see the structures of Dreadnought and Lele at the centre, but they see them there on the rim too, turning within their own thoughts and minds and hearts – twisting and contorting, unwinding and forming, sucking and pouring, at a faster and faster pace.

All across the wheel the sky grows dim.

Some people act like film projectors, flashing the reels of Dreadnought and Lele onto everyone they meet, believing everything they think they see, while others feel the terror of a deadening silence and suck the colours from the tree of life as quickly as they can through their appendages of pipes and tubes.

Yet many others are picking up the tools that lean in their corner – pens, hoes,

paintbrushes and calculators. Feet amongst millions of feet marching, dreaming, planning, growing.

And a few, seemingly lost, meander on rafts, searching for what might be missing beneath the dimming skies, their ears opening to languages lost to the collective manner of knowing.

#### IV

You walk; each step before you blurs into the steps behind until you find yourself near the edge of a precipice. You walk alongside it for a while. The rolling shrublands adjacent to you are so overeaten and eroded that no grasses grow between the spiny brush. Despite this, you know you can make a home in there, create joy with some of the people, find an identity that you can cover yourself in, forget the immensity of the world for a while. But you've got a taint that you bring everywhere you go. And you're seized from your body whenever you face it.

You watch your feet walk up to the edge of the cliff and hear a few pebbles clink clack tap down the side. The wind is whistling through the shrubs behind you and starting to shriek. You pull out your compass. Still broken. You reach down to touch the giant stones holding you up. Your fingers rest upon a brown mosaic lichen and you curl into a ball and ask for guidance. You clear your mind and open your imagination as far as it can possibly go. Meandering through you is a longing for a cave, a place to go into the dark. You thank the stones, uncurl to your feet and begin walking again: along the side of the cliff, towards a tangle of sleeping mountains, your footprints behind you pointing the way.