

A Faint Pattern

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This happened to me near the campsite on my friend's birthday. We'd all been feeling stronger and prouder but weren't yet ready to come of age. We let our folks have their fun while we engaged in games of Calvinball and followed their'd squirrels deeper into their shrinking territory. The five of us stood atop a boulder, surveying the river for skipping stones and chucking rocks. There was a faint desperation to those stones as they skid across the surface, full of anxious energy. It was easy to imagine them frantic to reach the other side of the stream. When they finally sank, I imagined a relief once they settled at the bottom and saw that all there was to fear were other stones.

My one friend clambered up the rounded shape with pride, clutching a large stone composed of cruel and acute angles. Giddy to cause a splash, he tripped just a bit — just enough — to force mineral structures down into the flesh. The easing erosion of time caught jagged change and bore through skin and soft tissue. As we waited on answers to our brays of help, I thought only of that dangling piece of him and how it was supposed to separate us from the beasts. Nine muscles; four tendons; two bones; that's all. The ones I could see didn't look so impressive. We stayed on the boulder afterwards but looked for smaller rocks to throw.

That night, I could hear the mountain lions prowling outside. The shuffling of brush bled into the swishing of the tent. The film of canvas separating us from the infinite woods couldn't have been much thicker than my skin.



This happened to me on an overcast day in Ocean Shores. A small white lump of fuzz and fat laid out in the distance, braced by sand, besieged by salty wind. I broke off from my family to confirm what I thought it was. It didn't look a thing like the Zoo book ads. Its furry brow sagged where its eyes should be. The multitude of

tiny isopods — carrion scavengers— shuffled in and out of the sockets, following tear streak trails. I figured they go for the softest parts first but it all looked soft to me.

It was the same day my brother learned to drive. The billion small particles wrapped around the tire as he shifted into braver gears. They were the same billion particles keeping the ton of coughing machinery from slipping beneath the shushing waves. It felt like skipping rocks.



This happened to me across time and space. The first friends of mine who died were imaginary. We used to transform living room spaces into tellurian vistas and alien tundras. We stayed up all night casting alchemy on the blankets and hiding from the red sky. When supper was ready, I told them to wait in my room.

My real friends walked through the woods and spoke our secret language with ardor. We didn't care that they were forced to walk alongside us. My real friends had big arms and wide smiles and kept us young ones centered with the gaze of a lazy eye.

The friends I imagined came to me when I traveled far from artificial light to stare in awe at the novel asterism. They came to me when the wonder draping the world was too great for me alone to hold and so I willed another with whom to share it. They were the first friends to die and I wish they were the last.