

One the Wings
Of this Prayer

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On the Wings of this Prayer

THERE ARE TWO STORIES MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER TOLD ME. HE said a long time ago before *them*—the Shark Throats, he called them, during the time of the warming world—there was a family in the way of the Tar Sands of Alberta. One day as the mother was gathering water, she stepped on teeth in the ice and muskeg. The jaws of an old man, a trapper, had thawed enough to bite her. She ran but she did not escape. The woman got very sick: buttons of pus boiling through a body rash, the paling, her hands hooking to claws. She asked her husband to bring her glass after glass of water. She was thirsty and panting. He kept bringing her more, yet she never drank. She said something was coming through her. Something starving.

Her voice then turned to a low growl as she began to rock for hours hissing, "Kill me now. Kill me now or I'll kill you all before the sunrise. Do it, do it if you love me. Kill me please. Your meat is magnificent and what roars in your veins is calling me. It's calling me to drink you open and warm me so sweetly. Oh let me start with your scars and scabs. Let me. Let me taste you. You'd let me if you love me."

As her husband returned with help, she snapped at the air with her teeth and rasped before striking out wildly at all of them with her nails. After they subdued her, she begged again for all of them to kill her—before the sunrise, she insisted. They tied her fists and feet and ran for more help. When they returned, she was gone. She'd torn her binding and fled, but the strangest thing—the oddest thing—were the glasses of water he'd brought her. They'd all turned to ice. Her

husband never saw his wife again. They think she was the first and they say she is still here as their queen, that she gives birth to them through her mouth. Hatching them through her over and over. More and more. *The boiled faces*, we call them—*zombies*, our son said—and they remember faces.

The Tar Sands of Alberta had tailing ponds and excavators, and I am sure those teeth belonged to that old trapper who lived out there before them. That old man, no matter how much money the oil companies offered him, would not budge, so they built and dug around him. He quit coming to town. There was a family who went to visit him, to bring him supplies, but he had changed. He had gone to white and had eaten his own lips and fingers. He had stepped in bear traps spiked to the floors on purpose. He could still speak and said the devil was in him now and that they had to cut him up. They had to burn his heart and scatter his ashes after they cut his head off.

They did everything he asked them to, but the land was uncovered and turned for years by excavators, tractors and the curiosity of men. We think those machines must have moved the heavy rocks that covered his limbs. We think his fingers were able to crawl back to the torso and legs and head. We don't think they burnt his heart to ashes because they saw him again and he killed many, many people by biting at them. Burning, cutting, stabbing, shooting—all of it was wasted until his family heard of him walking again, so they told the people how to stop him. And that's how we knew. That was how we knew to stop the boiled faces with the old ways.

There is a ritual to things now: a lunge shot with the Decapitator through the skull. It's a longer harpoon with a cross-axe on the hilt to ram and split the skull so zombies can't grab you. It detaches so you can begin chopping. Only good one on one. Useless against many. Scramble the brains. This blinds and confuses the body. With a quick twist, the top blade comes off to free the axe. Then you hack the right arm (the reaching one) off before the left (the grabbing one)—is to be cut. Then you take the right leg and the left before cutting the heart

out. As the heart is burnt with a sharpened flare, the Known People turn, look away and chant in Apache, "*Deeyá, Deeyá*" for "Leave, leave." We believe that what is left of the soul still rises and the spirit of the person inside will know to look away, as well, so it doesn't need to see what has happened to its body. There is respect and fear in this. Then we bury the limbs far apart and weigh them down with stones. The Known People buried everything and everyone pointing north, even though we've all seen some of them come back marked and scored. (Are they unburying each other or themselves?)

I can still speak Dogrib, me, but Apache is the common tongue for the Known People—or it was before the three of us were banished. For some reason, when the Hair Eaters come, it slows them when you sing or talk to them or chant in the first tongue. It's like they're listening. They weaken when you chant and that's when you take them.

All those old movies were true: body shots are wasted. Even with a shattered spine, they crawl. You'd think by now we'd be used to this, but they've a hot, sweet smell like dead fish that turns your stomach when they near. We then burn their limbs to ashes and scatter them. This is why the air tastes as it does. Their wild, rolling cry is used to paralyze, but it is not as strong as their mother's. I heard it a few times in the sky and felt the strength leave my legs, but our drums drown them out. If you drum you can stop their mewling cry, turn it to ice in their throats. Also, our little group has discovered that The Boiled Faces are terrified of butterflies. They run screaming—as if set to flames—when they see a butterfly and that's why we've camped here. Also, this is why we bottle them. All it takes is one butterfly and when one runs, they all do. It is hilarious. I laugh every time I see this. I wish I could have done The Butterfly Test to the Known People. I bet they would have all run away. I would have laughed so hard I would have thrown myself upon a Decapitator throat-first and not come back.

The zombies took our dogs first, systematically and determinedly. Once the dogs were gone we were blind and deaf to them. I miss the dogs. I can't even think of their names or I will weep. A wise hunter

looked where they looked, always, and dogs always know more about storms than humans. And we used the old ways when we took one down with the dogs: we poked their halfway-human-and-mean-as-starving eyes out so they wouldn't see you the next time. We sliced the tips of their ears off and hung them high so they wouldn't hear you the next time, but they do. The new ones can.

I hear of things in the ravaged south (no word from the west), but they, I hope, are rumours: death cults who eat or rape the Shark Throats for power, building sod huts and using their stomach linings for windows. In the east, thousands of people wait with their eyes closed in fields to be taken at once so they can come back to roam together. And they say the new generation of the Boiled Faces can sing themselves back together. Let us pray that this is not true.

Here in the north, the Known People dressed their children in rabbit fur and seal skins. I'm not sure if I agree with the practice of sewing bones under the skin, but I saw that most youths' faces were tattooed in the way of *Kakiniit*, ghost marks in memory of the One Sun. The Known People were greedy to learn our songs for the slowing.

If you are reading this, please know that I tell you these things because I love you and wish for the world a better way. I have sent this back to tell you this, my ancestor: the Tar Sands are ecocide. They will bring Her back. In both stories, it is the Tar Sands to blame. They is how the Wheetago will return.

As far as we can tell, the exact pinpoint is around the time when they transport one atom from one part of the world to the other. This has something to do with all of everything during your time. You must stop the Tar Sands. At all costs. If you read this, there is still a spirit with a starving heart there. Waiting to be resurrected.

I've seen them chase down an older couple as they ran in deep, black snow. One Shark Throat—a newer, smaller one, one with a long beak and hooks for thumbs, raced ahead and circled back, floating over the land. He cut his way into their stomachs with his claws. The elders' stomachs opened like mouths and out poured their guts.

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The larger Hair Eaters began to eat their unravelling intestines as they stumbled away. It was a game to them. The younger one gripped and squeezed their grey, steaming leashes as the half-alive elders tried to scream, but all that came out of their mouths was slop. The younger one began to slowly braid their guts together while pulling them closer, neater, playing with its food. The others feasted. The younger Hair Eater looked up and saw me and pointed but the others kept gorging. It opened its beak and let out a cry as it started to run towards me. The cry tangled my wings. Their sound: it rings through what is hollow inside you. It finds your marrow and squeezes it to weaken you. And I think once their song touches you, they can hear what you are thinking.

At night, when I sleepwalk, my soul leaves my body and I fly. I could always fly and that was why I had to save Thinksawhile. I spied on the leaders of the Known People. They were boiling and eating old moccasins and mukluks and they were talking of having him fall through the ice and eating him frozen. This explained our last few meals. Oh Creator, the things we've done to survive. That night, we took the boy and his computers and left, travelling downwind, upwind and through the fog. East. Always moving east. Watching the skies for ravens as ravens follow them for what's left.

Four Blankets Woman covered my eyes with ash. "So the new ones can see you."

"Heh eh," I said. "They are getting smarter, crueler."

She rubbed my back with palms of yarrow. "We need new medicine."

"You know what was beautiful?" I said. "Those elders they tore apart, they never stopped holding hands or trying to..."

"Shhh," she said as she rested on my chest. "I know how to beat them now."

I turned. "How?"

"The new ones have beaks."

"Heh eh."

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"And it has a tongue to direct sound?" I nodded.
 "I will chant on this to see."

The next morning I woke to find she'd tattooed my eyelids with syllables. She'd also sliced her left breast open and marked our Decapitators with strange symbols of whips and dots. "For your weapons and wings," she said.

I closed my eyes and looked at the fire to see this magic again.
 "Are these from heaven?"

"*In le,*" she said, stirring broth. "*Gah.* The Rabbit. There are only two left and they have passed their medicine to me. They told me how to beat them and the Bitch." Thinksawhile looked up from his computer.

"This will cost us one of our lives. We have to choose carefully." Four Blankets knew the way of the four winds. I had seen her part the clouds. She knew which root and moss to braid to make wick for cooking and heat. Her medicine was rabbit medicine. When she was thirteen, she saved the life of a doe. In turn, she was given Gah medicine. Four Blankets Woman had tattooed our tongues, so the Hair Eaters could not hear us speak. Not even in this dream.

She ran soot down her nose. "Whoever we choose will suffer, but it is the only way." The boy was young, weak. I had a blown right knee and couldn't stop talking in my sleep.

"We choose tonight," she said and left to slice her arm to ribbons. This was the cost of a Dream Thrower.

Thinksawhile went back to his computer. "I have an idea," he said. "A way to stop this. A way to undo all that's been done."

I began to braid my hair. "Tell me," I said. And he did. Before we fled, the sick cooked for us. The sick chanted for us. Scouts left. Our son vanished. Women gave birth to things that were killed immediately (except redheads), and there was a low growl from the cancered earth that trembled us. All Known Elders turned blind. What the last hunter brought was a hand that could be bear with an eye sewn backwards into the palm. Could be human, could be them.

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Knuckle sockets sucked dry. I touched one and singed my finger. It burns at night when I dream.

Now the air is loaded with ash that coats us and the wings of the butterflies, and my dreams. My dreams.

The Hair Eaters have eaten all the caribou, moose, bear, fox, wolf, bison, buffalo and everything under the earth here. We are too scared to check nets as they feast on our catch underwater and wait for boats. All we have left are creatures of the air: ducks and ptarmigan, geese, swans. We eat roots pretending they are what we used to love.

This message comes from the future. From our Dream Thrower. Remember, there is a hard way and an easy way: stop the Tar Sands and that old man's body from waking up. He—not she—is the beginning of the end. May your children—our ancestors—not know a time of being born hunted as we are all hunted now.

As for us, our season's done, and I miss smiling at my memories. It's getting colder now. Soon the fist of the sun will surrender to frost. We see it on the lower mountains across the way. Soon the butterflies will leave (where do they sleep at night?) and they will find us. They say some humans are farming other humans and making deals with the Hair Eaters. At night, when I lower myself to the cooling earth, as I breathe through my palms to cool my roaring head, my finger burns. I think this is how they are tracking us.

I heard a story once. It warmed even the hearts of the Known People. It was a story outside of Fort Providence. The buffalo ran with two giant horses, two Clydesdales: one white, one brown. When you approached the herd you could clap your hands and the buffalo would look one way, the horses the other. Wolves and the zombies could not come near for trampling and goring. I sometimes think about how the horses and buffalo adopted each other. What was their ritual for each other? I told that story the second night after moving with the Known People, and they marvelled until hunters from that region reported that two giant horse skulls burned among the mountains of bones. They also spoke of lakes now, filled with humans swimming in their

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own blood. Hundreds of women, men, children, elders, harpooned and buoyed by jerry cans to keep them floating. "It's the adrenaline," a sharpshooter who got away said. "It sweetens our blood. They keep us terrified and once we die, they tear into us. They just keep adding more and more people to these lakes. There were lines of people for miles, as far as we could see."

I saw a grey whale once, rolling in shallow water. Hundreds of Hair Eaters poured over the body biting, ripping at the barnacles and sea lice. Others clawed and reached into the eyes and blow-holes. One dove into its mouth. Then others. Then more and more. It thrashed and couldn't get away. The Shark Throats ate their way from the inside until I could see its skeleton. I watched a mile away and heard it scream. Their cries are supposed to be subsonic but I heard it. I still hear it.

I've seen a pack of Hair Eaters down a pack of bison in slush. The lead bull flipped in the air as the opposing Hair Eaters forked to cut him off. As he flipped in the air, two were upon him ripping and tearing at his belly and balls. He was hollowed out completely by the time he landed, still kicking.

We wish you luck. The future is a curse. There are no human trails left. I was born running from them as they are born starving and hunting for us. Now, we carry on in fever. We carry on for you and what you do next.

Four Blankets Woman has thrown two dreams now: one for you and the other to prove it. In your time, Taiwan will shut down its biggest highway for seven suns to allow for the safe passage of one million butterflies. If this is so, you will know this warning to be true.

I pray you remember this when you wake up.

You must remember this.

You must stop the Tar Sands. Do not bring cancer to our Mother. Do not unleash them.

On the wings of this atomized prayer, we reach to you with all we have left.

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Now, they have expanded their range to the fullest here and are crossing the ice of time to reach you—you who live in the time before the sun twins, when fish only had one mouth, when moose knew who they were.

You *can* change the future.

Now wake up.