



Swallow

Eden
Robinson

Swallow

by Eden Robinson

Before the world was swallowed, we lived in a double-wide trailer and the sun beat down on the tin roof in the summer. I would lie on the top bunk and let the heat fry my brain.

The mattress was lumpy. My shiny, satin basketball shorts were loose, hand-me-downs still in the shape of their previous owner. My mouth was dry. Sweat pooled everywhere, dripped down my face, down my armpits, slid across my skin like slow moving snails. The walls were warped fake wood panel. The ceiling was stained. I lay with my hands at my side, palms up, feet slightly apart, breathing slowly. Long breaths in. Long breaths out. Long breaths in. Long breaths out.

We lived near a dock where the children would swim. Their voices echoed in the bay the way they would underwater. The washed-out sky darkened near the mountains and the reflection of it coloured the ocean. Speedboats carved white wakes. A car cruised by. A woman called out, voice sharp:

"Get out of the damned water! I mean it! I told you to be home hours ago!"

Night never really came. I knew, I knew, I knew I could rise up out of my body and wander to the spirit world in the sky if I could just forget to think. If I could tune out the cats yowling in the neighbour's yard or the cough of the woman who walked her dogs and smoked cigarette after cigarette, curled into herself like a question mark.

The sun rose like the dead on Judgement Day, all jubilant and shiny, judge-y gold fingers pointing everywhere.

I tried for days. I tried until green geometric patterns swirled in front of my eyes and my body felt Novocain numb. I crawled from the bunk and staggered down the hallway and poured myself a bowl of Honeycomb cereal. I sat beside my brother, Daniel, and we watched cartoons. People thought we were twins, but we were eighteen months apart. Our mother used the same bowl to cut our hair. His cowlicks went left; mine went right. His eyes were mud-puddle brown. Mine were as brown as newly turned compost. I was older, and remembered him when he first came home, pudgy and loud. Now we were summer dark and lean from running around, swimming with our friends and eating cereal for as many meals as we could get away with.

"Were you sitting
twitched constantly?"

"No."

"I thought you

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Glowstick

"Huh."

I was imagining
that would be, or
When we were
merging. Sometime
mixed up and I'd
Northern Lights in
the dead who whisper

My brother and
forest with my grandfather
and a machete. D
baskets. Nana's
replacement but h
logs. She used her
flies. Here beneath
by the spongy moss
green. An ATV wh

"A shaman had
of this grove of devils
couldn't see ghosts
a shaman and coun
here, in this clearing
prayed and fasted,
was driven mad by
became a great hea

"What happened

lived in a double-wide
roof in the summer. I
ry my brain.

basketball shorts were
their previous owner.
ere, dripped down my
kin like slow moving
anel. The ceiling was
alms up, feet slightly
ng breaths out. Long

n would swim. Their
uld underwater. The
ins and the reflection
d white wakes. A car

I told you to be home

, I knew I could rise
world in the sky if I
t the cats yowling in
man who walked her
rled into herself like

Day, all jubilant and
re.

tric patterns swirled
in numb. I crawled
y and poured myself
brother, Daniel, and
twins, but we were
ame bowl to cut our
His eyes were mud-
rned compost. I was
e home, pudgy and
m running around,
r as many meals as

"Were you sick?" Daniel said, scratching his bony legs. He
twitched constantly, tapping to invisible rhythms.

"No."

"I thought you were sick. You were green all over."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Glowstick green, like you got bit by a radioactive spider."

"Huh."

I was imagining myself as Spiderman and thinking how cool
that would be, or my brother was imagining me as Spiderman.
When we were small our thoughts ran together like streams
merging. Sometimes we'd think together and we'd get ourselves
mixed up and I'd remember him on the top bunk glowing like
Northern Lights in the middle of winter, crackling, surrounded by
the dead who whispered like dry leaves.

My brother and I used to drive down logging roads into the
forest with my grandmother, armed with plastic laundry baskets
and a machete. Daniel carried our water. I carried the laundry
baskets. Nana wielded the machete, had a clipped step from a hip
replacement but her eyes went beady if you tried to help her over
logs. She used her trucker's cap to swap mosquitoes and black
flies. Here beneath the spruce canopy, our footsteps were muffled
by the spongy moss and the light of the summer sun was dim
green. An ATV whined in the distance.

"A shaman had two sons," she'd told us as we came to the edge
of this grove of devil's club. "One who wanted to be a shaman, but
couldn't see ghosts, and the younger one, who didn't want to be
a shaman and couldn't stop seeing ghosts. The older son fasted
here, in this clearing and drank only water, but no matter how he
prayed and fasted, he could only see our world. The younger son
was driven mad by the spirits, until he accepted his gift and he
became a great healer."

"What happened to the other son?" I'd said.

She'd shrugged.

"How do you know if you're a shaman?" Daniel had said.

"The chief of the owegas will call to him. It will shimmer and glow," Nana had said. "Only the shaman will see this. The owegas will offer itself, its medicine, for the good of the people."

I could see the light, Nana's sweaty face, a tangle of shrubs. Daniel scanned the devil's club grove and pointed to a tall, twisted shrub that had a finger of light swaying on one of its broad, face-sized leaf. Nana smiled. She said a prayer of gratitude and left tobacco. She cut it down at its base, leaving the roots so it could regrow. She chopped it into manageable sizes and put them in the laundry basket which I carried back to our truck, my mouth full of bile.

A few years later, I was hired as a summer student. I passed most of my coffee breaks alone, needing a time-out from the snarkfest of our crew. The drudgery of our brush-clearing job at the archaeological dig inspired a brand of sniping reserved for remote mining camps or extended car trips. We'd spent the morning clearing duqua, stinging nettle, from the remains of the fishing village an hour's drive from home. The village was beside the Kitimat River, and the river led down to the ocean, winding through thick sea grass on the mud flats to get to the ocean.

I slipped away from camp, wandering down the logging road. Gangly young alders arched over a small clearing. Mosquitoes and black flies formed a whiny halo around my head until they found a sweet spot just below my safety helmet where I'd sweated off the DEET. Beyond the clearing, I made my way to the understory of spruce, picked through a cluster of devil's club, owegas, a shrub encrusted with hooked thorns that caught in your skin and had to be picked out with needles or oozed out in puss-filled scabs.

My watch beeped, marking the end of my coffee break. I stood, brushing the moss off my ass. The noise startled a grizzly, which stood on his back legs, sniffing the air at the edge of the owegas grove. Lean and long with a darker patch of blond-brown fur on his chest, probably two years old and just kicked away from his mother. A good five hundred pounds of irritated muscle. I hefted my machete. We considered each other.

He moaned, a
He flopped down
his paw back lik
turned like a sun

"Nate, come
shithead."

"Base, this is

"Are you shitt

"I am so not s

We turned to
the ground. The
blasted their bea
and the bear sv
wasn't worth the

I went back
tobacco, a fine g

"Thanks," I s

The grove v
shimmer. Whe:

I stripped or
around our hea
over his face, s
talked. My brot
button must to
He tied his ha
look of the sta
my wife died.
and fell like a
water like fryin
carved supple
troughs.

Daniel had said.

It will shimmer and see this. The owegas he people."

a tangle of shrubs. nted to a tall, twisted ae of its broad, face- of gratitude and left he roots so it could and put them in the k, my mouth full of

r student. I passed time-out from the brush-clearing job f sniping reserved os. We'd spent the the remains of the village was beside he ocean, winding o the ocean.

the logging road. g. Mosquitoes and d until they found I'd sweated off the the understory of owegas, a shrub r skin and had to filled scabs.

ee break. I stood, l a grizzly, which ge of the owegas nd-brown fur on d away from his muscle. I hefted

He moaned, a peeved sound like an old man woken from sleep. He flopped down and landed on a branch of devil's club, snatching his paw back like he'd been burnt. He circled the grove, and I turned like a sunflower following the sun.

"Nate, come in," base called on my radio. "Breaks over, shithead."

"Base, this is Nate," I said. "Got a grizzly on my ass."

"Are you shitting me?"

"I am so not shitting you."

We turned together in our little dance as he huffed and pawed the ground. The spit left my mouth. My hands shook. My crew blasted their bear horns as they rumbled towards us in their trucks and the bear swung his head back and forth before deciding I wasn't worth the effort.

I went back to the grove the next day and dumped a tin of tobacco, a fine grade, a big chunk of my pay cheque.

"Thanks," I said.

The grove was silent. I waited to see if the owegas would shimmer. When nothing happened, I went back to work.

I stripped on the rocky shore beside Daniel, our breath steaming around our heads like thought bubbles. His skin was pulled tight over his face, so tight you could see the bones of his jaw when he talked. My brother's stomach curved in so much I thought his belly button must touch his spine. Each rib was haunted by shadows. He tied his hair back in a lopsided ponytail. He had the ageless look of the starving, and we had stopped counting the years after my wife died. We shivered as we took our positions. The tide rose and fell like a sleeper's breath. Sheets of rain splattered on the water like frying bacon. Glaciers ground this granite shore smooth, carved supple curves that cup tidal pools, these smooth, wandering troughs.

We'll be like pearl divers, I'd told him, remembering an old documentary I'd watched with my dad. Tiny Japanese women paddled out to the oyster beds and held their breath longer than anyone thought humanly possible, diving like seals, lithe in the water. The weather had given us a break and we'd walked south. Winters used to mean waist-high snow, but now it was high wind and endless rain whipped sideways, scouring your exposed skin. Our camp ran out of food weeks ago and we were down to boiling lichen. I remembered home, or my brother did, and we'd navigated by the mountain peaks.

There used to be seaweed and barnacles on these humpbacked rocks. Small white rings like chalked outlines around a corpse marked the place where the barnacles used to be. We jumped, carrying rocks we'd tied to our ankles. Cold seared me as I hit the water, stuttered my heart as my skin tingled and went numb. The underwater light was slimy grey.

Our trailer emerged from the gloom, a squashed parenthesis of metal. We were aiming for our neighbour's house with its steel reinforced walls designed to withstand a nuclear blast. His daughters had dutifully come home every summer and jarred their way through salmon, crabs, seal, duck and bear. He'd stocked for the apocalypse, and now it was here and he was dead. The urge to breathe was a hot stone in my chest. My brother landed on the silt-encrusted deck and muck swirled to his waist.

The front door squealed as it swung like a crooked tooth. We cut our rocks free in the hallway and I shook the glow stick I wore around my neck until it flicked awake, lighting the house like night vision goggles, toxic green. We eel-slithered along the ceiling. Daniel darted down, hands flailing, and came up with a jar. He skittered out of the house and was gone.

Our neighbour had two cherry trees and a grove of crab apple trees. One summer, tent caterpillars ate their way through all the fruit trees in the valley and he grimly set his orchard on fire. Each tree lit with a gas-fuelled whoosh, and the caterpillars squirmed like doomed souls. I stood with the other kids from the neighbourhood, awed and secretly delighted. In the spring, the trunks spouted new trees.

The pantry door was open and the jars glittered where they'd come free of their cardboard boxes. I pulled myself down by the

steel shelves and head throbbed. Facing the ocean me was filled with tendrils mining me? Brain blobs, throbbed like a hammer.

I spun in its water, the surface, glittering water, and salt. The swarm pulsed in the tidal flats. I could

Daniel had scooped them into rocks. I'd lost some. I popped the first. My brother gave me for the swarm to

Nana used to say of the small ice age. None of the people mountains had been blue the further a granite rock and stone blackened and tilted

We crouched in the building, taking to cocked his head, his jaws moved under looking for. I made sleep here. Building but delivering other making other people like a sleeping baby

The town had its foundations traced

remembering an old
y Japanese women
breath longer than
e seals, lithe in the
we'd walked south.
ow it was high wind
your exposed skin.
ere down to boiling
and we'd navigated

these humpbacked
s around a corpse
o be. We jumped,
red me as I hit the
d went numb. The

washed parenthesis
r's house with its
nuclear blast. His
er and jarred their
c. He'd stocked for
dead. The urge to
landed on the silt-

crooked tooth. We
e glow stick I wore
ie house like night
along the ceiling.
up with a jar. He

rove of crab apple
ay through all the
hard on fire. Each
lars squirmed like
e neighbourhood,
inks spouted new

red where they'd
rself down by the

steel shelves and grabbed an armful of what I hoped was fish. My head throbbed. I flipped somehow, and came out of the house facing the ocean floor. When I righted myself, the water above me was filled with a jellyfish the size of a truck, translucent, with tendrils mining the water hopefully. I floated up. Could it see me? Brain blobs, gut blobs, dark spots in the sac convulsed as it throbbed like a heart, propelling itself through the water and past me.

I spun in its wake. The jellyfish's cap flattened where it met the surface, glittering like an oily soap bubble. I sucked in air, and water, and salt. Down the channel, the ocean curdled as a distant swarm pulsed inland with the tide. Their single scout made it to the tidal flats. I coughed. I swam for shore.

Daniel had scored a jar of cherries the colour of rotted liver. He poured them into his mouth as he watched me haul myself up the rocks. I'd lost some of my load and had come away with two jars. I popped the first one open. Salmon as grey as the sky. I grinned. My brother gave me the last third of his cherries. We'd have to wait for the swarm to move on before we tried again.

Nana used to say we had come to this valley after the last glacier of the small ice age, which had left no trees on the mountains. None of the people born today would remember how green these mountains had been, how the mountains had slowly sunk into blue the further away you looked. All they would know was the granite rock and stubborn skeletons of spruce, hemlock and cedar, blackened and tilting drunkenly to the ground, refusing to fall.

We crouched on the third floor of a concrete apartment building, taking turns peering over the crumbling wall. Daniel cocked his head, listening. In this light, the tendons working his jaws moved under his skin. I didn't bother asking what we were looking for. I made a hurry-up motion with my hands. We couldn't sleep here. Buildings were always traps, places promising shelter but delivering other hungry people, people not bothered at all by making other people scream as they cut them. I carried our last jar like a sleeping baby.

The town had been scratched from the earth. The concrete foundations traced the forms of the buildings in the ground like

an alien language. New York got all the coverage, the slow sink and the tidal surges turning the banking district into a new Venice. But here, unwitnessed, the ocean licked the bowl of the valley clean and spat the shells of homes on the walls of the mountain before grumbling into retreat.

As we made our way to the back of the building, the stench of rot and the metallic tang of blood thickened, a ripe fog of smell. I refused to enter the room, shaking my head. I waited in the hallway while my brother went inside. I heard him whispering, but couldn't tell what he was saying. A smear of blood I hadn't noticed before dragged along the wall, black in the low light. The handprints were small. Daniel's face glistened with sweat as he came in close beside me and pressed his mouth against my ear.

"Four men," he whispered. "Heading north."

I nodded and he let go of my arm, his damp palms leaving chilled spots where he'd touched. How much I had wanted to see the dead, so many years ago. To have the gifts to be a shaman. The Creator knew what he was doing. There wasn't enough food left in the world to bribe me to look in that room or to hear what the newly dead people had said to make Daniel's eyes that haunted.