

THE IMMORTAL OF LOCH ANNETH

I fling dirt over my shoulder. All of my muscles are sore. My palms are sore. The joints of my fingers are sore. I awoke last night from a dead sleep with a pang of a memory so intense and precise it felt as though I had been stabbed. It was fleeting as a dream: I knew that if I did not get up that instant and act, I may lose the thought forever.

It was a memory of burying something extremely precious. Upon waking and standing, I rummaged around for a shovel of mine, and then walked around the sandy beach of Loch Anneth by the silver light of the moon. As my footsteps crunched over the sand, I held tight to the memory of the burying, of the place where something was buried. Even the place has been changed by time, but I remember where it was if I don't overthink it. It was a clearing. Now it is overgrown, indistinct from the forest surrounding. By the silver moonlight, I uprooted a tree that was grown on the place of the burial, and pushed it aside. By the light of the morning, I dug where the roots have grown, cutting through them, reaching where they were reaching. Now by light of day, as I am drenched in sweat, I dig clay, until finally, my shovel strikes something else. I dig the hole wider, until I have uncovered the entire surface of a finished and stained wooden box, six feet tall and three feet wide, and I know that this is the thing I have come for. I dig the hole wider yet, so that I can have room enough to pry open the lid with my shovel. The lid does not give easily, but with a bellowing groan, the wood and the nails bend apart, and I lift the lid and heave it aside, and I look

into the box. There in the box, there are the remains of a deer, the legs crouched slightly to fit inside, as though the deer is laying down to nest. The flesh and all except the bones is decomposed. Only the skeleton remains. I sit against the side of the freshly dug hole, the dirt clinging to my drenched body, and I stare at them—it—them—her.

I loved her. As I sit against the side of the hole and stare, I begin to weep. I loved her. I have lost her. And I know nothing else, other than that it was a long time ago. I cannot remember what she was like. I cannot remember anything that we did, other than the almost forgotten fact that at the end, I buried her. I try to remember what she looked like in life, but every detail is imagined, not recalled. I loved her, and I lost her, and now there is nothing there but the dim memory of both, and the wrenching feeling that I ought not be able to do this, be able to mourn for something that I no longer know.

Some of my old loves are like ashes. There was once something alight here. Something dancing, nourishing, absorbing, burning. Now it is inert. I try to move it around again and feel heat, comfort, warmth, pain, scalding pain, anything, but it is not there anymore. Some of my old loves are like nettles in the pads of my fingers. I am doing something that has nothing to do with them, and then they sting me. I try to find them, and they hide. I cannot remove them. I know that someday they will sting me again, and then someday they will not, and I might not ever know. Some of my old loves are like a note: *I love you and I'm looking forward to spending more time with you tomorrow*. There is nothing alive, but when I happen upon them again, it is like they are still here to speak.

I stare at the doe. The sense of loss here is a monstrous shadow of the actual thing that is now so far behind me I will never see it again so long as I live.

Would that I could turn around and look back into the past, earlier, and earlier again, and know who this was, and how I loved her. Would that I were not cast into the ocean of time with an anchor upon my ankles and forced to forever wonder if there is a bottom, and suspect that there is not. There is no sun. There is no floor.

I secure the lid back atop the box, and I bury the doe for a second time. It helps. It takes away the momentous sting to know that this has happened a second time now, that this is not a monolith, but merely a thing which I did once, and I can do again. The pain is still pain, but it is dulled. I return the soil to where it was, and leave the tree fallen. I trudge to the lakeside, and sit on the sand, filthy and tear-streaked, staring out at the water that shines in the daytime. My wife Heleyne comes and finds me. She sits beside me a while. Then she takes me by the hand, pulls me upright, and leads me into the piercing cold water. When the sweat and dirt are cleansed from me, we return again to the beach, and begin walking back to our cabin, so that we can get a fire on and warm up.

We arrive at the cabin. We change into dry clothes. We start a fire in the hearth, and sit on the floor before it, wrapped together in one blanket, staring as the flames lick upwards from the logs.

“Thank you,” I tell Heleyne. In my head, I repeat the name. *Heleyne. Heleyne. Heleyne.* “I love you.”

“Tell me about her,” Heleyne says.

I tell her about the doe, though there is little to say. It really is as though I am telling her about the dream I had last night that I have already forgotten most of the details of.

Earlier

There is a stone tower standing on an island at the center of Loch Anneth. Many days, in periods when I am alone, I find myself atop the tower, wearing a wide brimmed hat to shade myself from the sun. I circle around and around, looking out at the lake, at the forests beyond. The lake is the pupil to the green forest’s iris. Loch Anneth, and the green forest surrounding, sit at the border of two landscapes which are far more immense.

To the south, stretching beyond sight, is the orange forest. It is a strange place. The trees there bear fruit, but the fruit cannot be picked no matter how hard one pulls, and if one pulls for more than a moment, it will sting the hand even through a steel gauntlet. Bushes are razor thorned, the vines drip with poison that will cause one a blistering rash. The soil appears good for

planting, but if one takes a trowel to it, fire will shoot forth from the earth. No flora in the orange forest has grown or been removed so long as I can remember. No fruit from any tree has fallen or replenished, but merely hangs perpetually. It is a place frozen in time, harshly resistant to being interfered with. Through it, there is a dirt road, leading from the greater world to Loch Anneth.

To the north, stretching beyond sight, is the tangled labyrinth. On the surface it appears as a landscape of mountains, some minor, some snow-capped, all formed into a heap of lines that resemble a floor covered wall to wall in discarded thread. There is one mountain here adjacent to the green forest. In it, if one traverses up a small valley, they will arrive at a door, the entrance to the labyrinth which spans beneath every mountain beyond, and reaches down to depths unknown. It is said that the world which we know was once the home of the gods, but that they have all moved on to a new world that is currently being weaved, and that our current world is discarded, fallen, rotting, finite, perilous, soon to be uninhabitable. It is said that if one traverses the tangled labyrinth, that on the other side will be the new home of the gods, a blossoming paradise in progress. Who is to say if anyone has made it?

I believe that a very long time ago, I began life in the world beyond the orange forest, and one day traveled up the road, to the lake and the green forest. I believe that I built the tower on which I now stand. It is never easy to say what is memory and what is fancy, but I recall great difficulty getting the large slabs of stone out here by boat. I remember—I think I remember—capsizing a number of times, losing weeks of work on the cut slabs. When I am up on the tower, I am looking for someone. I stand, and I pace, and I search the green forest. My gaze hangs on the road through the orange forest. My gaze hangs on the valley to the door of the labyrinth. I have an unreasonable hope that whoever it is I am looking for will stand out so strongly that it will not matter how many millennia it has been since I even knew who I am waiting for. A father? A mother? A sibling? A child? I haven't the faintest. So whenever I see someone from up here, I go to meet them, and I hope that something will stir.

Down the road through the orange forest, a lone figure approaches. I descend the tower, push my rowboat into the lake, and venture forth to meet this person. I bring a vase of water good for drinking or washing.

When I arrive, the figure is still on their way up the road through the orange forest. They move at a shamble. I stand at the border. As they come nearer, I can discern their trouble. She is burned, blistered, cut, and in her arms she cradles two children, one over top of the other. I set the vase down in the road, and go to get cloth, and a shovel.

When I return, she has arrived at the green forest, and has laid the two children beside each other on a patch of grass. She has used the water to wash them. Their faces, necks, and hands are free of dirt. They are dead. Girls. Twins. The mother kneels before them. She is in a bad way and needs to be attended to, but it is not a great stretch of empathy for me to understand that she first must attend to her mourning, however long or labored.

I set down the cloth and the shovel beside the empty vase, and I go to sit on a fallen tree away from her.

Later in the day, I hear digging. I return to find the mother digging the graves. She has wrapped each body in cloth.

"I would dig them, if you would let me. Rest would do you well."

"Allow me this," she answers.

"Of course." I linger. "If you would tell me their names, I would make them headstones."

"I wouldn't ask that of you. But I would tell you the names. Maigis. Bayach."

"And your name?"

"Heleyne. And your name?"

"Duncan."

"Thank you for the water, Duncan. And the veils, and the use of your spade."

I leave her to her work, and go to retrieve a meal for her, for when she is finished, and another vase of water to wash her own wounds with, and to drink. When night falls, she agrees to stay in a cabin I have nearby, all to herself, and I will return to the tower on the island.

Weeks pass as her health returns to her, and her wounds begin to heal.

One day, I am walking carefully through the forest, in the form of a deer. I have remembered something. With Heleyne beginning to be well again, there is an aspect of her character, a certain joy she takes in resolute stubbornness, which has reminded me of something long, long past, so vague that I don't know why it has reminded me of what it has. But nonetheless, I am going to retrieve something that I had until now forgotten about.

In the green forest surrounding Loch Anneth, there is far more than meets the eyes of men. To the man, each tree has a number of branches too numerous to easily count, but nonetheless very finite. To the squirrel, one can ascend the trunk and arrive at a tree with thousands of branches, nooks in which to sleep and run and play and hide things away, each birch its own manor, each yew its own castle. To the man, the ground underfoot is uniform and solid. To the shrew, the ground underfoot is as varied as the forest on the surface, spaces of loose dirt and hard, veins of rock, roots thin and thick stretching as wide below ground as the tree above reaches into the air. To the man, we see the odd deer trail. To the deer, the forest is a sprawling park, rich with trails and fields in which to dip into, away from men's sights.

As a deer, I am making my way, carefully, to one such hidden clearing. The walk has taken most of the day. I can be in no rush.

I come to the clearing of short grass, at the center of which is a grand yew tree. In my memory it was a sapling. Nonetheless, against the base of it leans a tall red bottle. I go to it, take it into my mouth, and leave, carrying it away. As I arrive back at the lake, I find myself a man again, bottle of wine in my hand, staring at the waters of Loch Anneth which shine in the evening sun. I go to Heleyne's cabin, and we share the wine together.

As the months go by, we are living in the cabin together. She would no longer like to venture into the tangled labyrinth. She would like to live here with me, for a time.

How many times has it started this way? Someone comes to me hurt, and when they are healed, we find that the process of healing has grafted me onto them.

I walk slowly through a graveyard at the most secluded edge of the green forest, bordering on the orange forest. I walk at a snail's pace, going a few feet to the hour, staring at the names on the headstones. *Gennat. Rowland. Joan.* Some of the names, I can vividly remember the person who is now buried in earth, unbreathing. *Marriory. Mede. Waltir.* Some of the names ring as faintly as the names of people I have never actually met, but only heard about secondhand. *Maybe Alesoun. Maybe Wilmot. Maybe Avis. Maybe Theresa. Maybe Myrina.* Most of the names are weatherworn from the stone beyond legibility. The headstones that I placed on the graves of Maigis and Bayach will last Heleyne's lifetime. I will watch them return to being just stones.

Earlier

My hooves crunch over the snow as I carefully walk. My bare nose is colder than ice, and my breath is a hearth's plume before me. It is the middle of the night, but with a full moon and snow to reflect it, it may as well be daytime aside from the temperature.

I carefully come around a tree, and then, seeing something move in a snowbank ahead, I freeze in place. I am ready to bolt away, into the hidden places.

The figure moves again. It is a man. He huddles hunched over, shivering, arms wrapped around his torso, face exposed. His face is bright red from the cold. He will die like this.

I dash away. I bound over bushes and fallen trees to a cache I only vaguely remember. In a hidden clearing of short grass, a pocket world untouched by the snow and cold, I see the sapling of a yew tree. On the ground beside it is a heavy winter coat, and beside that, a tall red bottle of wine. I take the coat in my mouth, and bound back towards the man.

I am making a great deal of noise this time, and this time when I approach, he is looking at me. I walk up to him and push the coat against him. He appears confused but grateful, and puts

the coat on. When it is on, I push myself against him as well, laying down on top of him, insisting upon him whatever warmth I can provide, even though in truth, I would be shocked if it is enough. Gently, he rests a hand on me. As the cold hours of the night stretch on, he has laid down beside me, huddling his hands and face between his chest and my back, creating a pocket of warmth.

When the sun rises, I am surprised he is still alive. The world becomes as bright as the lake, as the sun takes the place of the moon and the surface of the snow melts enough to glisten like diamonds.

The man remains huddled against me for some hours into the morning. Eventually, when I sense he is warmed enough to survive without me, I scramble slowly away from him, stand, and find myself as a human, which I have not been in a long, long time. The body feels awkward, squat, brutish. The man looks up at me agape.

“Duncan,” I offer in an agreeable tone, and extend my hand.

“Waltir,” the man returns through stiff lips and chattering teeth. He takes my hand, and I pull him up.

I help him to the beach, where he sits in the sun as I assemble a fire for us.

We make a camp. He is frostbitten, badly. I gather food and firewood for us and he tends the fire while I am away. Eventually when he is well enough and springtime has come, we go on walks around the lake, and through the green forest. He happens upon things that I can tell him about. A fallen and overgrown kiln, where I used to fire clay pots. A sundial carved from stone, the face now cracked in half, the needle broken away and missing completely—until he lead me here and reminded me, I had forgotten that I ever once cared about the time of day, though now I remember, there was a phase when I used to rather obsess over it, a long while back. A rowboat tucked away in a natural high shelf within a cave, which has held up better than I could have expected of it. We take it out to the lake and give it a try. It fills with water very quickly, and Waltir tries to salvage it, but I pull him up from the water, insisting that he leave it sink.

As we sit on the beach afterwards, staring at where the rowboat sank, Waltir asks me something. “The name of this lake. Loch Anneth. Do you know who Anneth was?”

“I suspect she was my first wife.”

“You suspect?”

“Do you remember the start of your life?”

“...No.”

“Nor I.”

He accepts this.

That night as we are sitting beside each other at the fire in our camp, he grabs me by the bicep and pulls me in to a kiss. This is new to me—I have never shared romance with a man before. But it does not feel wrong. In fact, it feels delightful: a thing that I am somehow confident I have *never* done before, and now I am. I kiss him in return, and then we are lying down before each other beside the campfire.

As the months go by, we begin work on building a cabin at our campsite.

Earlier

In defiance and in tears, I have built a tower. It is a far cry from my most aesthetically pleasing work—I truly do have a talent for working with stone—but what it lacks in looks, it makes up for in stubbornness. It will stand for my lifetime. I stand atop the tower, arms crossed, staring unblinking at the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, waiting for her to emerge.

Five thousand years pass. Someone shoots an arrow at my head. I uncross my arms and catch it, and throw the damnable thing over the parapet to the ground. It falls. I hear it land on the grass below. I hear the waves of the lake lapping against the shore of the island. I blink. I blink repeatedly. I close my eyes hard. I bow my head, facing the floor, eyes shut tight, as the gravity of how much time I have spent unmoving catches up with me.

I open my eyes, and look to where the arrow was shot from. The scoundrel sees that I see him. He stops aiming his next shot and disappears into the green forest. I look back to the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, as though seeing it

again for the first time. I am waiting for someone to come out of the door. Someone who I love. She is tall with handsome features, black hair straight and long, deadly with a short sword, stubborn as a stone, overflowingly generous to those she has found pity on, sharp tongued, quick witted, irreverent and righteous. My wife. I am waiting for my wife. Gods how I love her. Gods how long I will wait.

But as I fix my stance to resume staring at the valley again, I wonder whether I must wait and do nothing else. Perhaps I may take this time for my own edification, so that when she returns, she will find a man more worthy to be called her husband.

The man who shot an arrow at me is walking up the valley in the mountainside, towards the door. Good riddance to him. I watch him go in. Then I turn, and descend the stairs.

In the green forest, there is a hill. I build a house on top of it, such that it can't be missed as one passes through from the mountainside valley to the orange forest road. When she emerges, she will see this manor, an exact replica of the home she grew up in, and she will come to me.

When I drive the last nail into this house—this beacon—I feel, for the first time in many, many years, that a burden is lifted from me. My vigilance is no longer needed without rest. For the first time in thousands of years, I sleep.

As time goes on, I do still go out to the island, stand atop the tower, and stare at the valley. But I do other things too now. I start a garden. I start to farm. Eating for me is more of a pastime than a necessity. Most of the food goes to the wildlife. If they ravage my garden, I wish them well. If anything makes it to harvest, I leave it out for the birds and the rodents anyways.

A thousand years pass. One morning I row out to the island, my mind on the tomato vines that are sprouting, where I might want to put in a flower bed, what I might do for mulch. I enter the tower, place my foot on the first step, and pause there. I try to remember why I am here.

I do remember, eventually. I am expecting someone. Of course, yes, I am keeping a look out. I climb the stairs, and on the roof of the tower, I pace from one side to the other, looking at the valley for a time, and then looking at the road. I am expecting someone I care deeply about. Her. Her? It has been so

long. I am not even certain of how long it has been, by now. Lifetime after lifetime, a memory of a memory of a memory in perpetuity. I hope that when they come, they will be striking enough that I recognize them.

Seasons go by. I continue to tend to my crops. One spring day, when I am standing on the roof of the tower, facing the orange forest, I see a figure coming up the road. This happens sometimes. It is rare, though. An occasion to be appreciated.

This figure is quite different than most, I realize jovially. Not a human. For some unknowable reason, there is a doe coming to the green forest. She walks tall, her footsteps headstrong and precise.

It is actually some weeks before I see her next. I have been leaving grain out for the birds. I sit on a swinging bench on the porch in the shade, and I watch them peck and eat. And there, coming up out of the woods, is the doe. I hold my breath, not wanting to startle her. She is cautious as she approaches to join the rambunctious birds in eating the grain.

She lowers her head, eats a bit, and then bounds away. I breathe again.

She comes again the next day, and the next. Even into the winter, I leave grain out for her on the snow, and she comes, and she eats. I am not hidden to her. She often looks at me as I sit on the swinging bench, watching. One day, instead of waiting on the bench, I wait standing in front of the porch. She is cautious of this. I see her stand at the edge of the woods for some time before she decides I am still trustworthy, and comes to eat. The winter melts and gives way back to spring. I suppose that she trusts me quite a lot when she comes out to meet me as I toss out the grain for her and the birds, even if she does keep a distance between us still. One day, I am delighted when I am throwing out the grain and she walks straight up to me, and places her soft nose against me. I rest a hand on her side, look into her eyes, and without words, try to convey all of my gratitude to her for her gift of this moment.

The moment passes, and she lowers her head to eat some of the grain I have tossed out. I have a handful for myself as well.

One day, as I am walking through the woods, I happen upon her in the wild. We both freeze, surprised at each other. She

begins walking to me, and I to her, lightly, cautiously. I press my soft nose lightly against her side. I look down at myself, and realize jovially that I am quite different than before: a buck, antlers and all. She bounds away, and I bound after her, and we frolic through the green forest, and I see how much more to it there is than even I had known, lo these many years. That night we nest down together. I find myself spending most of my time with her, only occasionally seeing to my garden, and even in this, she stands beside me, watching with interest. We weather the winter together. More than once I lead us into the manor, and we nest down in a living room kept warm by the hearth fire. When springtime comes again, the world is living and we frolic through it. One day in a hidden clearing, she flags me, and I feel a tiny and precise pang of hurt, as though grabbing something and discovering that there is a nettle in my fingertip. I am unsettled, and I ignore her advances. The next day she flags me again, and although there is once again this pang, it feels distant, and there is much more presently her enrapturing scent, presence, heat, longing to care and be cared for. I go in unto her. The months go by, and she gives birth to the first of our fawns, a doe and a buck.

Earlier, at the start

Anneth and I walk along the road through the orange forest, hand in wicked hand. It is biting cold, though no snow falls on this place. When we arrive at the green forest, we have to climb over a snowbank.

We walk across the frozen lake, and sit together on the center of the island at the center of the lake in the center of the forest, two glints in a pupil in an iris.

“If we become separated in the labyrinth,” I say, “and it is hopeless for us to find each other, then let us return back, far as we may have come, and we will meet again at this lake.”

“Of course,” she tells me.

The winter wind howls across us.

“How long shall I wait for you?” she asks.

I consider this as the wind screeches. Eventually I answer, “As long as you feel I am worth. I will wait for you forever.”

Much later, nearing the end

After a fashion, I have decided I will never again be alone when another partner dies. We lounge around bonfires in the parched dirt, I and my concubines, women, men, doe, stag, squirrel, songbird, snake, wasp, anything that moves that I think might move me. I am fluid, sometimes in the form of one specie, but often caught somewhere between two or several. I know my partners' names occasionally, but much more viscerally I know their scents, their noises, their behavior. When I am anything mammalian or adjacent, I drink. No matter what I am, I am seldom without some manner of contact, nurture, stimulation. I am never alone.

But it never lasts forever. Loving as many as I do only multiplies how often I fall for someone deeply, and then they depart unto eternity. I try to fill the void left by them with a hundred others, but it is a fool's errand. The blot left by them hangs suspended over me as I fall through time, ever more out of reach, ever more unfillable, ever more doomed to acceptance or denial, then to vagueness, then to nothing.

After a fashion, I can endure no more, and I flee into Loch Anneth as a minnow, and spend a long, long, long, long, long time alone.

Later, at the end

I emerge from Loch Anneth immense, profoundly muscular, profoundly greedy, profoundly wise, scaled and clawed and frightening. My claws rake through the frost and sand as I circumnavigate the beach, taking deep breaths of the cold winter air. When I have done a full lap and have reacclimated to a life in air, I leap up, flap my immense wings, and take flight.

I am leaving Loch Anneth. As a dragon, I rocket past the valley and vault above the mountain range over the tangled labyrinth. I do not expect that there is an afterlife. I do not expect that there is an afterlife where everyone I've ever loved, from the first to the last, is waiting for me. But whether there is or there isn't, I will join them.