

December Lake, Michigan

Two brothers drive west in a silver, 2005 Toyota Camry. Upbeat punk music from an early album by eastern youth fills the car and the heater is on. They travel along a quiet stretch of I-96 through alternating sections of bare maple trees and wide, flat fields with occasional red barns. Snow is on the ground, but only a thin layer that mostly hangs on in the shadows. Billboards for local dentists or radio stations or bible verses add bright colors to the cold landscape and grey clouds. The brothers are nervously approaching an anticipated discussion because they feel that, out of anyone else, they are an even match for each other. It feels somewhat like a waiting room.

“How have things been?”

“They’re getting better.”

They are following a kind of etiquette or protocol, and somewhat begrudgingly since they know that vital answers lie within the other and they only have this afternoon together. It was around four months ago when the youngest was hospitalized for suicidal intent. Seven years ago, the oldest was hospitalized for suicidal intent. A couple of times, their mother had been hospitalized for suicidal intent. There are different kinds of celestial bodies to orbit, and this was theirs.

“In a way, knowing that you and mom went through it too was really helpful”

The other says that he’s glad because, “it makes that time kind of worth it then.”

The car pulls in to a state park on the lakeshore north of Grand Haven. They like to visit the lake in the winter, it’s healthy to feel small in front of that endless, freezing horizon. The car doors open and they step out into the clean wind. They wanted to spend their afternoon here because one of the brothers hasn’t seen winter in three years and the lake is unusually high. So high, that the erosion of the dunes is worse than anticipated and homes along the shore are collapsing into the water. The wide expanse of the lake is dark and it’s difficult to tell what kind of blue it is. Further out on the horizon, there are a few rays of light shining down through the clouds. There is only the sound of wind and waves.

They walk along the parking lot and see within a stand of trees a large grey home on a sandy precipice. Below the house, on the property’s beachfront, there is a large yellow excavator which had been stacking large limestone boulders in an effort to slow down the dune’s degradation. Now, it sits vacant in the water while the surf runs up and over its treads and then disperses throughout the stone riprap.

They stand and witness the dunes being pulled into the water. They steadily unfold. Sharing the conclusions they’ve come to in order to see what lines up. One brother explains how fruitless depression can be since it just repeatedly leaves him exhausted. Instead, he felt that anger is worth exploring more because at least it includes a notion of justice. Then suffering can be seen as mutable and turned into a type of strength. Though in running that idea out, depression becomes a very selfish and weak thing, and this can just exacerbate the problem, especially if you’re not up for the fight. The other brother says that he has explored this mental calibration and it felt like anger for the sake of anger often left him feeling absurd.

They hear a noise, either caused by the buckling of wood or glass, and they stand silently for a moment. Some sand is knocked loose and it cascades over the dune.

“I feel like that house.”

They get back in the car and drive further along the lakeshore. The thin road bends as it follows along the backside of the dunes and, when their car crests a hill, there is a bright gleam of water through the bare trees. They stop and get out to see various solutions to this erosion problem. There are more boulders, there are corrugated metal retaining walls, there are trees that have been ripped out and piled up, there are beautiful ledges of masonry, and there are houses split open with their contents in the wet sand.

At this point they are navigating moral relativism and whether we can judge others' solutions. Since they're from the same family, they come from a similar context and, as such, they've ended up quite stoic. They enjoy the company of others and are likeable, but often fall victim to superiority complexes and feeling disgusted with themselves as a result. They disclose guarded personal secrets to each other to see how their paths have strayed and, despite the divergences, they are relieved to see that they've arrived at similar spots. If one brother is here and is ok, then it must hold true for the other.

On the highway and heading east, they become increasingly more honest, less filtered, and more intense. The trust culminates in him asking the other,

“Why not drive this car into the other lane right now?”

He thinks about this day and the arguments formed. He also tries to be considerate of the other again. Then much of that is ditched as he lets the sense of exhaustion grow and returns to familiar grounds. After a few beats he says wearily, “Because of this instinct for self-preservation.”

He clarifies-- of course your immediate concern is that you don't know who are in those other cars. But when your logic lands you within those little nihilistic circles where the bright, flashing conclusion is just *Cease* over and over again, and you don't care about anyone or anything anymore, you can still rely on that biological hesitation. He says that it's ironic how, for individuals who pride themselves on being rational, it's the irrational that delivers redemption.

They continue talking for another twenty minutes and arrive home. Despite this, the wind and the waves and the sand persist. The houses calibrate and hesitate.

Visible time and invisible pain.