Spectacle of the Missing

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Such strangeness in Malone with its harbor of clear fish-laden lakes and the shadowy tree-crested high rise of forty-two Adirondack peaks. There’s the demented elderly man named Ronny stooping and mumbling with a trail of cigar smoke chugging from his lips, stealing tips from the counter jar at the coffee shop, his face frozen in a scowl, eyebrows sprouting upwards like tiny ragged vines. The child named Anna-Lee who cannot speak the truth, lies about the color of the walls in her bedroom, saying they are painted with green giraffes and blue gorillas and red toucans, though everyone knows from her stuttering red-faced mother her walls are just plain pink. Hurrying down the streets at a frenzied pace, the mother tries to keep her child from saying anything, clutching the girl’s hand, tugging and half-dragging her along. And there are those crippled by accident; Blaine reduced to near catatonia at only twenty-five from a fall at a construction site; Benny at thirty-two without the use of his arms or legs from a corner he took too fast on his motorcycle, striking the gravel and pavement at eighty miles per hour; Naomi, an angel-faced thirteen-year-old who lost her legs in a snowmobile accident, the machine flipping up and landing on her, crushing her legs so that muscle and bone and tissue all ground together into mortar. And there’s Lib, though no one’s sure if her missing tongue is due to an accident. Some say she bit it off purposefully, out of spite or insanity. Others say she fell. Others still think her mother had something to do with it.

From a willow branch dipping and cracking beneath his weight, Evan squints through the darkness into Lib’s bedroom. Lamplight falls through her window wedged open just high enough to let a well-traveled breeze gust through. He can smell pine from the mountains and taste fish from the lakes. He sees Lib open her mouth.

In a mirror she studies the dark lump, semblance of a tongue, hunching at the back of her palate. Her tongue’s what a neck might look like severed from its head. She knows Evan is outside her window and wonders if he can see
into her mouth too, wonders if her parted lips are seductive, wonders if he gets just a glimpse will he look for more. She snaps her teeth shut, turns out the light, disappears, her life suddenly sealed off by the absence of light.

Evan had heard about this girl. She existed for him mostly as a myth growing up, or as a warning from his mother. “Don’t go running around the house in your stockings like that. You know about that girl over on Indian Lake who bit off her tongue when she slipped on the wood floors.” Evan, not really considering her real, thought of her as only an empty threat. A flimsy attempt for parents to control their children. Like at school the myth about making gruesome expressions and your face getting stuck that way.

In the dark cavern of Lib’s room, she imagines her own voice, low and breathy, like the wind when it rains, teases and whispers through the crowns of the trees, hisses and rumbles its unhappiness until the leaves are left dripping, quaking, trembling, shaking off the weight of so much water, misery like so many drops of rain. Her voice if she had one. Her voice that sometimes calls to her, though it was severed long ago. She hears the boy move in the tree outside her window; the willow’s branch threatens to break beneath the weight of his desire. He is climbing down, down, down towards the soft thump of the ground. She’s climbing down into a darkness of her own but there is no bottom for her feet to find.

In the morning Evan follows Lib to the lake where she wanders along the grassy and wooded shore to a rocky beach. Evan sits on a grassy spot, tucks his knees against his chest, and watches from a distance. He picks at a pimple on his chin until it bleeds. Horseflies orbit Lib’s head like some sickening red halo. She works her fingers through her hair, stopping to press her fingertips to her nose and clean her nails with a stem of grass. The sky is gray, the water is gray, the same gray tangled in the blue of Lib’s eyes. An osprey dips down to the surface, rises back to the sky and then dives, wings tucked close at its sides, crashes into the water and reemerges with a fish in its talons. Lib doesn’t seem to see this. She gazes at the water splashing her toes and butting against the rock where she sits, a battering of liquid against solid. It’s easy for Evan to believe that she doesn’t hear anything, isn’t a part of this world around them.

Tangling her hair. The pain is not enough, and yet is enough to keep her awake in this lonesome silence, to remind her that she is alive. Her scalp is her center, a place of release, and she finds her permanence in the blood letting. She scrapes away the scabs, leaves unseen scars carved into her scalp. Gritty blood beneath her nails. Granular like sand. And there’s always buzzing in her ears, like the steady hum of an abused piano, the chords holding a chaotic blend of sound that’s not quite music.

They sit at a distance from one another as the sun creeps forward in the sky, a hazy globe inching like lamplight into the grayness. Lib stops moving for a while and Evan observes her like a statue, like a landscape, static yet beautiful. Her hair is cropped at her chin and hangs in matted clumps. He wants to untangle her hair with his fingers and separate the fine tendrils, but sits on his hands so he will not reach out. When he was a boy he used to brush his mother’s hair, a great pleasure for him to untangle things and put them in order. He feels himself too old to do this for his mother but feels it would be easy to brush Lib’s hair for her, that it is somehow allowed. She would never be able to tell anyone, would not be able to say no. At the same time he is afraid of her. Her silence is foreboding and her eyes are almost purple, such a bruised and brooding blue. If only he could touch inside her mouth, he might discover the secrets of her mind. Somehow he believes that inside her nothing would make sense to him, that she is filled with knowledge without language. The thought makes him shudder and sicken. He breathes deeply and can taste the pickerel and the rotting water plants. Eutrophic scents, the lake mudding over and crowding with life. The busyness of it makes him dizzy.

The boy with the shadow self sits slouching not far from Lib. A ghostly shawl clings to his shoulders, casts a shadow as if it were a living thing, more living than the boy who tries to be invisible. Naturally a shrinker, a lurker. He is surprising here, along this abandoned lakeshore. Usually she can sit all day without meeting another person. And if they do come they look her in the mouth and scurry away. Afraid of things they can’t see. He cringes when she looks towards him. His eyes are slippery and do not fix themselves upon her two chapped lips, the fingers tangled in her hair. His skin’s so pale she can see blue lines running up his jaws. She imagines her finger rubbed along that jaw would come away chalky, the blue exposed even more. She stares and waits for him to go. Horseflies mumble in her ears, tangle in her hair. Water plashes against the rock she sits on. She dips her toes into the water, subtle warmth on the surface, icy pinprick cold beyond, itchy heat of the muck beneath. She’s buried to her knees and the water tries to move through her skin and bone, as it
tries to move through everything, as it will eventually move through the rock she perches upon, one particle at a time. She embraces the erosion, though she does not wish for it, simply accepts the process. Knows it’s inevitable and plunges herself in instead of struggling against.

Evan, crouching, moves towards Lib, as he would approach an animal, close to the ground, his hands open and slightly extended from his sides. He hunches forward watching her from downcast eyes, not sure if he should hold eye contact or approach without looking at her. Her eyes are unwavering and opaque. He has the same uncanny feeling he gets when he sees an owl and stares into the jaundiced eyes. There is cruelty there, and hunger. There is always that moment when Evan will start to feel as if he might know the creature’s thoughts and then that feeling will flit away and the bird will break eye contact, leave Evan locked on the other side of some unknowable thing. Perhaps the secret of flying.

When he is close enough that he can reach out and touch her, she looks back down at the water between her legs, the mud covering her toes. He sits beside her, though back a little so he doesn’t get wet. Reaching out, he buries a hand in her hair and rakes his fingers downward, weaving through tangles until he comes out the end of her hair at her shoulder. She snaps away from him and steps into the lake, standing knee deep in water and looking back at him. Indiscernible sounds spit from her mouth and Evan tries to catch a look inside, see what a missing tongue looks like this close. He feels the chill of the water around his own calves, though he sits unmoving on the shore, frozen by her stare.

He tells her, I don’t want to hurt you. He speaks soothingly, in a voice he’s never used before, didn’t know he possessed. You’ve got tangles in your hair. Let me get them out for you.

He holds his hands up and tries to be sheepish, like the brave and innocent men he sees in old movies.

There haven’t been anyone else’s fingers in Lib’s hair for years, since her mother stopped trying to corner her and drag a brush through it. Since her mother stopped trying to touch her altogether not long after Lib’s tongue disappeared. Disappeared isn’t the right way to think of it, but Lib doesn’t want to remember. It happened so long ago that she sometimes thinks she’s forgotten. Then she’ll be talking to herself by the lake and a strange sound will come from her mouth and she’ll remember what she’s missing.

Lib stays up to her knees in the water and Evan picks at the grass around him and studies the ground in front of him, sneaks looks at Lib’s legs in the
water. He talks to her, hoping she will forget herself, unclasp her lips and let him see inside.

I know what it’s like not to be able to say anything, he says. If I say things, they become true, and if they’re true it’s not like I can pretend they’re not anymore. They start having color and shape and sound.

Evan needs to look in her mouth, look at pieces of this girl that aren’t there. He thinks if he’s seen something so profound it will take him out of the brightness of the well-lit world and allow him into a realm of darkness where he can vanish. He keeps talking.

How do you see something that isn’t there? Why do people always seek missing things? Can’t just let them be absent. We’ve all got something that’s disappeared, so maybe we’re just trying to discover the ways we’re all the same.

When she sits next to him again and lets him run his fingers through her hair he doesn’t tell her about his desire to look in her mouth.

Evan comes again in the late morning the next day to run his fingers through her hair and tell her things. He tells her about his mother. Her hands puckered and sudsy after washing dishes. Those pruned and waterlogged hands petting the jade elephant on the windowsill. The elephant a remnant of her marriage to Evan’s father, the only thing she brought to the new home. Evan moves like a shadow through the two houses, his father’s and his mother’s, always trying to be invisible, but somehow never able to go entirely unseen. He sneaks into the kitchen after his mother climbs the stairs to bed and touches the water stains on the elephant’s back, the dark burden it carries evaporates in his hands before he can discover what it means.

Lib lets her hands soak in the lake until they are shriveled and heavy. She presses them to her nose and can smell the pickerel, the water bugs, the sewage from the cabins along the shore. The surface of the lake glints and waves with the sun, slices her mind with bright flashes of yellow and white light, refracts into her face so she is blinded and ceases to know where she is and her own vulnerability. She closes her eyes and parts her lips.

Evan pulls her hands from her nose and brings her back, snuffs out the lake smells meddling her mind. His face casts a shadow on her own, blocking out the bright and shifting light. Blue veins edge his face, float on the surface of his transparent skin. His hands are soft. She could tear them with her nails but she touches gently, her wrinkled fingers pressing into his hands, kneading them. His skin malleable and compliant and strange. She can push them away without using force, deny them from knowing her skin.
Evan speaks to break the silence, to make her forget how his hands sought her.

I’ll build a house of stone and mud so close to the shore that when we sleep we’ll feel like we’re at the bottom of the lake. He’s never spoken this way to anyone. The sun prods her skull with brilliant white spokes and Lib shuts her eyes, smiles without showing her teeth, and hugs her knees. She tips her chin towards the sky, waiting to feel Evan’s fingers working through the tangles in her hair.

Her head snaps back and she’s dragged by her hair across the stone and mud. She sees three figures, tan-faced boys with scabbed knees and cracking knuckles. She can hear their bones creaking like trees groaning against the wind. Their shouts are short and excited, yipping orders that she hears and doesn’t hear. She kicks against them but her legs flail, her skin slicing and bruising against reeds and rocks in her struggle to be free. They pinch her nose shut to block out air. Blood reddens her lip and slides around her nostrils. She sees arms and legs, shirt sleeves and cuffs, muddy sneakers coming untied. She clenches her teeth against them but her lungs exhaust. They keep her nose pinched until she gasps wide for breath. Pry at her mouth once it’s open, leaving it raw at the corners. She feels fingers wriggling in her mouth like dry worms. Can feel eyes peering down to the redness of her throat. She kicks and writhes but it does nothing.

Evan goes to her, pushing and bellowing at the boys who had kicked him out of the way. Lib keeps grappling and hissing and striking even as he struggles to lift her from the ground, as if she doesn’t know him from those other boys. There is shouting all around him, rattling his brain and the air in front of his face, muddling colors so that the sky is trembling green and the air is shattering orange.