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Love in A Bleak Climate: A Tale of Desolation in the Deserts of New Mexico

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Loyola Marymount University
University Honors
Program

Love in A Bleak Climate:

A Tale of Desolation in the Deserts of New Mexico

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Remy Rogers
8 December, 2020

Love in A Bleak Climate:

A Tale of Desolation in the Deserts of New Mexico

The old woman pulls the rusty, screeching door of her pickup open, letting her dog leap up onto the weathered, leather seats. She climbs in after him, her knees popping. Her daughter leans her forearms on the sill of the car window, pausing for a moment.

“You know you don’t have to go this year.” She says finally. Sadly. “I think dad would forgive you.”

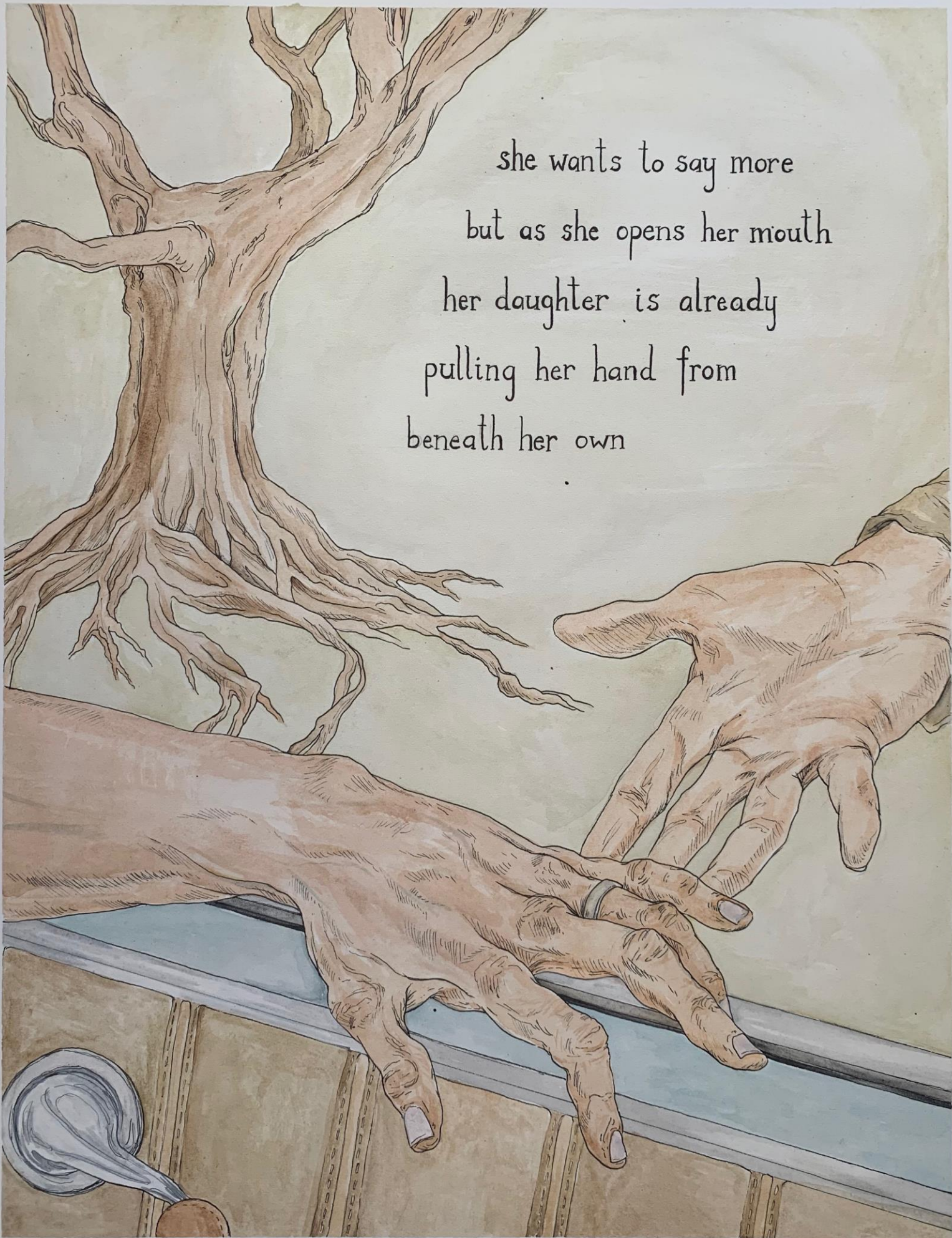
In the passenger seat, the dog turns to look at the woman as she reaches over and pats the back of her daughter’s hand.

“I want to go,” she said in a low voice, “don’t you worry about me.”

“I’ll always worry about you.” She looks at the dog, “be a good boy and take care of her for me.”

The woman pauses. She wants to say more, but as she opens her mouth, her daughter is already pulling her hand from beneath her own. She watches her walk away from the car, wave briefly from her porch, then disappear through her front door, behind which her husband is making her morning coffee. Turning to the dog, the woman nods and puts the car in drive. Her daughter doesn’t understand why she liked going down to New Mexico for her long backpacking trips. Spending hours in her truck, driving past the vast mountains and foothills and gorgeous vistas of her own state, just so she can live amongst the dusty cacti for a few days. Hours spent in her truck listening to the rattle of the old engine. Hours spent absentmindedly rubbing behind the soft ears of her dog. He likes to sit in the passenger seat while she drives. He likes to listen to the woman humming to herself. He sits perfectly upright the whole ride, his

she wants to say more
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head on a swivel as he watches scenes pass by in short flashes. Cityscapes of alleyways and houses and bridges, then hills of brilliant green giving way to plains, gray and fallow, then from highways, to small side roads, to overgrown and bumpy dirt paths, the adobe houses that dot the surrounding hills become sparser and fall further and further into the distance.

People say the desert is the land of the dead. Dry, cracked earth stretching for miles and miles. The only movement on the horizon are dust devils swirling suddenly, then fading just as quickly. Trees are far and few between, most already succumbed to the elements, stripped of everything green that once lived on their tall stalks and left, as gnarled and warped dry bones, to bake under the sun. It is a pitiless place. However, the old woman always thought dead lands were the most beautiful and most haunting company. She liked the eerie feeling that she could just walk out into the desert, be swallowed whole and simply disappear from the world. She found some sort of weird comfort in that.

she liked the eerie feeling that she could just walk out
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and simply disappear from the world



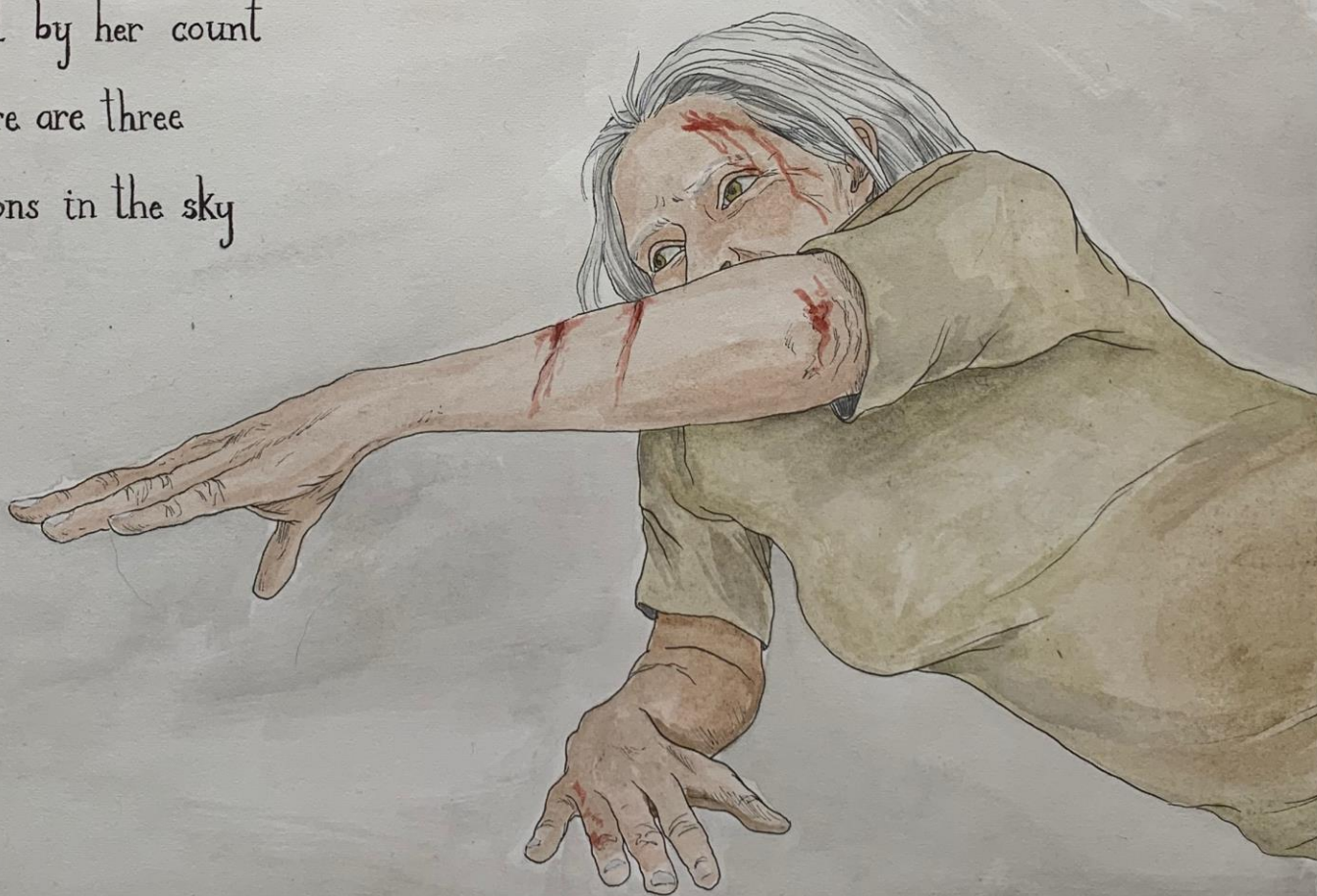
It's the second night in the desert and the woman has been trying to start a fire for quite a while now, but her slightly arthritic hands are making poor headway hacking away on the flint with her small machete. The feeble sparks light up her face periodically, as well as the dog's face beside her, his head rests comfortably on her knee as she works. The woman pauses, rubbing her hands together, and looks down at the dog. In his curled position, his small, slender feet are all gathered together, the white spots on the tops of his paws almost seem to align. The dog looks up at the woman and notices there seem to be more wrinkles around her eyes than there were yesterday and that they weave together with the lines on her cheeks like a tapestry. Cold is beginning to drip slowly down both their spines and the woman resumes her quest, her hands becoming more and more urgent with each failed stroke. When she feels the dog abruptly lift his head from her leg, the shadow of warmth he left behind dissolving, she doesn't think much of it, having just achieved a small flame. It's when he explodes to his feet with a guttural bark and bolts into the dark that she grows alarmed, dropping the flint and the machete to run desperately after him.

The sliver of a crescent moon casts just enough light to see by. The woman spots the dark shape of her dog, chasing a smaller animal that darts across rock and dry brush. She cannot see its form, but from the glint of yellow eyes, she knows what it is. Fear pierces the woman's heart and she tries to run faster, calling after her dog desperately, trying to get him to turn back. She yells so loudly her raspy voice erupts through her throat like sandpaper. She loses sight of him in the dark, but she needn't see; it is the rise of howls that guide the woman into the heart of a frenzy. Squinting into the dark, she's able to make out the movement of chaotic, frantic, bestial bodies. The dog is snarling and biting and wrestling with a group of gaunt coyotes. The woman dives in, she struggles to grab her dog around the waist, kicking and jabbing at their attackers.

She's seen this play before. One coyote lures the dog away, inviting it to chase, only to lead the animal to the rest of the pack. The woman fumbles with her belt with panic-stricken hands and whips at them with her belt buckle, but, like waves over sand, the coyotes keep crashing in and in on them. They are hollow-cheeked and spindly, but the dog and the woman both know that a hungry animal is a dangerous animal. Their yelping howls reverberate in her ears – a chaotic cacophony of horror. She feels their breath on her skin, and then their teeth, and then their tongues. She experiences the sensation of their bites, but cannot yet feel the pain; she is too focused on her dog to feel much of anything except spine-chilling alarm.

She finally catches hold of her dog and launches him up and out of the pack, an action which unintentionally topples them both back into the deep arroyo that lies in wait behind them. The dog feels a moment of utter weightlessness as he slips from the woman's arms, but it lasts less than a second before he hits gritty earth and rock. As she falls, the woman feels a sharp, blunt hit to her forehead, as if she had been thwacked by a two-by-four and the pain finally comes – overpowering her completely. She does not know how long they fell for, but when she opens her eyes, she finds herself gazing up to the top of the small knoll, haunted by the disembodied, glowing, sickly yellow eyes of the coyotes that dance and dart and glare down at them. She wonders if they will come after them, seeking to finish the deed, but as quickly as they had appeared, those yellow eyes wink out, swallowed by the desert.

the woman can hear
her dogs low whimpering
she tries to roll over towards him
but her vision is swirling
and by her count
there are three
moons in the sky



The woman can barely breathe. The dog can hardly move.

From where he lies, the dog can just see the small fire that the woman had finally lit sputter out at the crest of a farther hill. It had seemed like a much shorter distance when he had blindly chased the coyote, but, from the way his leg is stinging, it now appears insurmountable. The woman can hear her dog's low whimpering. She tries to roll over towards him, but her vision is swirling and, by her count, there are three moons in the sky. All she can do is turn her head and grope with her hand in the dirt until skin finds fur. Wet fur. She grows very cold.

It takes them all night to climb the slope up to their small camp. The woman can barely tell what is ground and what is sky. As she crawls, she has to keep one hand gripped in the matted fur at the nape of the dog's neck in order to keep stable. He makes horrible noises as he climbs and the woman cries hot tears because she knows he is in great pain, carrying her up this hill. When they reach the top, in the early morning light, she looks back down the slope and sees that, amongst the paw-prints, there is an unbroken line in the dirt from where the dog had dragged his back leg, limp and unusable, behind him.

Their camp is in ruins. It is a wasteland of shredded tent and scattered belongings. The woman swears she'd strung their sack of food up in a tree, like she always did on these solo treks of hers, but perhaps those crafty creatures had gnawed at the rope or perhaps it had snapped on its own accord or her sailor's knot hadn't held. Either way, the food – their future in this desert – is lost.

"Gone," she says to her dog, who licks his paws tenderly and tries to brush the goat-heads from his fur.

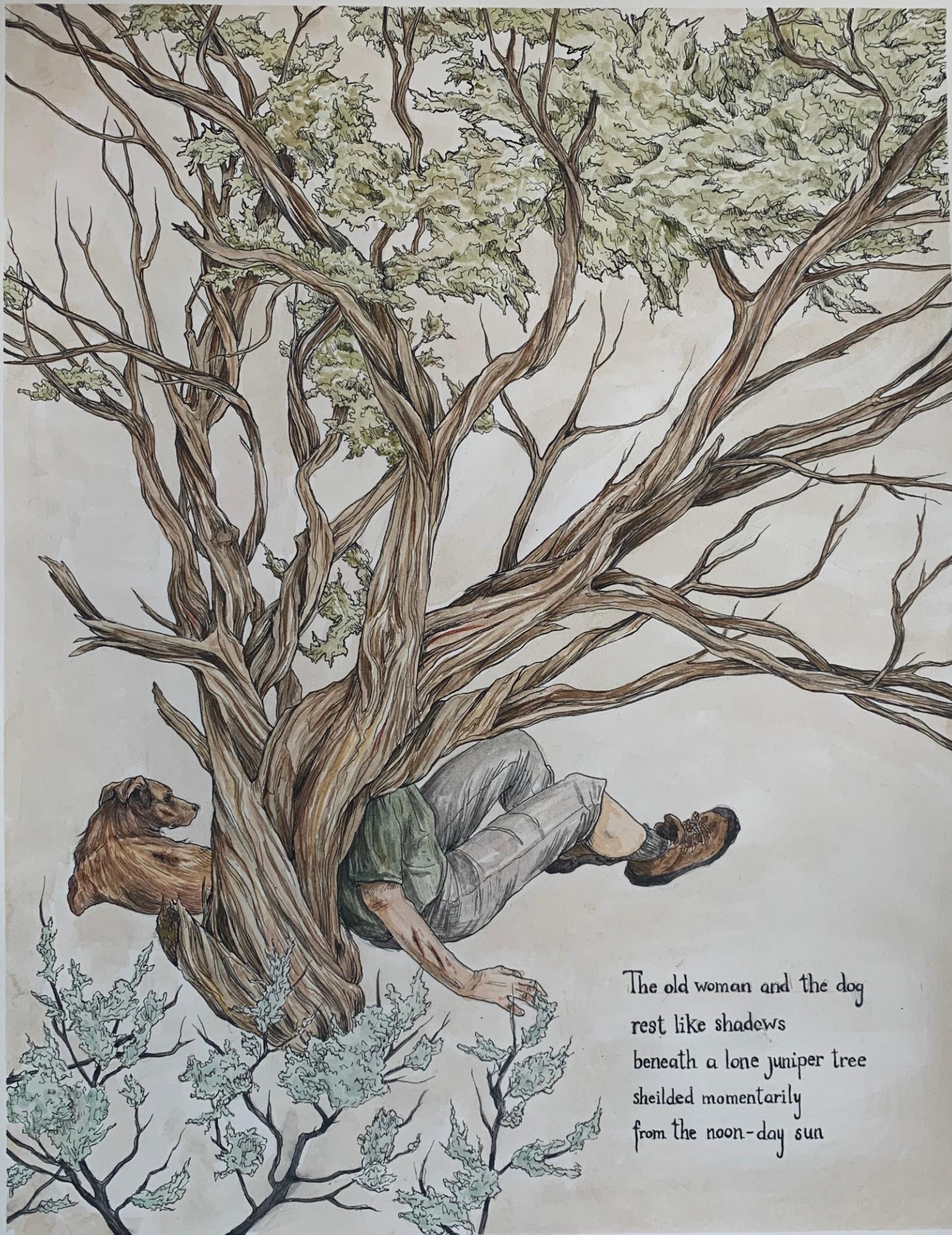
The woman is able to salvage a pack of all those things not broken or stolen including all the water that remained, the flint, the machete, and a small hunting knife. She can't help but hear her late husband's voice, calling her a fool for coming out here all alone year after year.

“Why not at least bring a map?” he used to say.

“But it's all up here,” she'd tap her brow, “why do I need a map if it's all up here?”

Both the woman and the dog know that they can't go back the way they came. Too many miles between them and the humble well that marks the beginning of this wild patch of desert. No, they must go on. They must continue to the end of the wilderness, to the edge of the small river where – if this were any other year – the woman and the dog would spend their final night on its banks, enjoying that last moment of open sky before returning to the city. That's where they must go. But as the woman looks at her dog, he grows fuzzier and fuzzier. There is an ache somewhere deep behind her eyes and she has to crouch, spitting up saliva and bile into the red dirt.

The dog, for the first time in his life, thinks his master looks weak.



The old woman and the dog
rest like shadows
beneath a lone juniper tree
shielded momentarily
from the noon-day sun

The dog and the woman now rest like shadows beneath a lone juniper tree, shielded momentarily from the noon-day sun. The dog lifts his head and looks at the woman with hooded, impassible eyes. The woman looks back at the dog from where she wearily leans against the coarse bark of the juniper, her arm sprawled over the pack. The nasty gash in the dog's back leg is still open and angry and his face is swollen from his fight with the coyotes, though most of his other nicks and scratches have scabbed over. The woman had wrapped his leg in an extra cotton shirt, but he still cannot walk without stumbling and the woman cannot bear the sound of her dog's whimpering. She has cradled him in her torn arms across the arid terrain, through the canyons of marbled stone, weaving amongst the whispering pinõns and lonely yuccas for many, many miles. Her hold on him through the wasteland has been as tenuous as her hold on consciousness. She stumbles more and more as she walks, tripping over rocks since the act of picking up her feet is becoming nearly impossible. The desert sways under her gaze. The stark and cracked branches of dead trees blend and tangle with the outstretched arms of cholla cactuses, and in the far, far distance, the dusty yellow dirt fades subtly into tauntingly blue shadows on the distant mountains. She walks on instinct alone, the pounding bump on her forehead has eliminated every sense of direction from her haggard brain. The dog alone knows where they are, but the bursts of brilliant pain that overcome him has made him less and less sure of himself. They've come upon only one lake thus far. A pitiful puddle of brown, sludgy water that they drank all the same, hoping the end of the desert will reach them before disease sets in. The woman collapses here and there, beneath junipers like this one, the only thing tall enough to provide even marginal shade.

She has cradled him in her torn arms
across the arid terrain through the canyons of marbled stone
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for many many miles

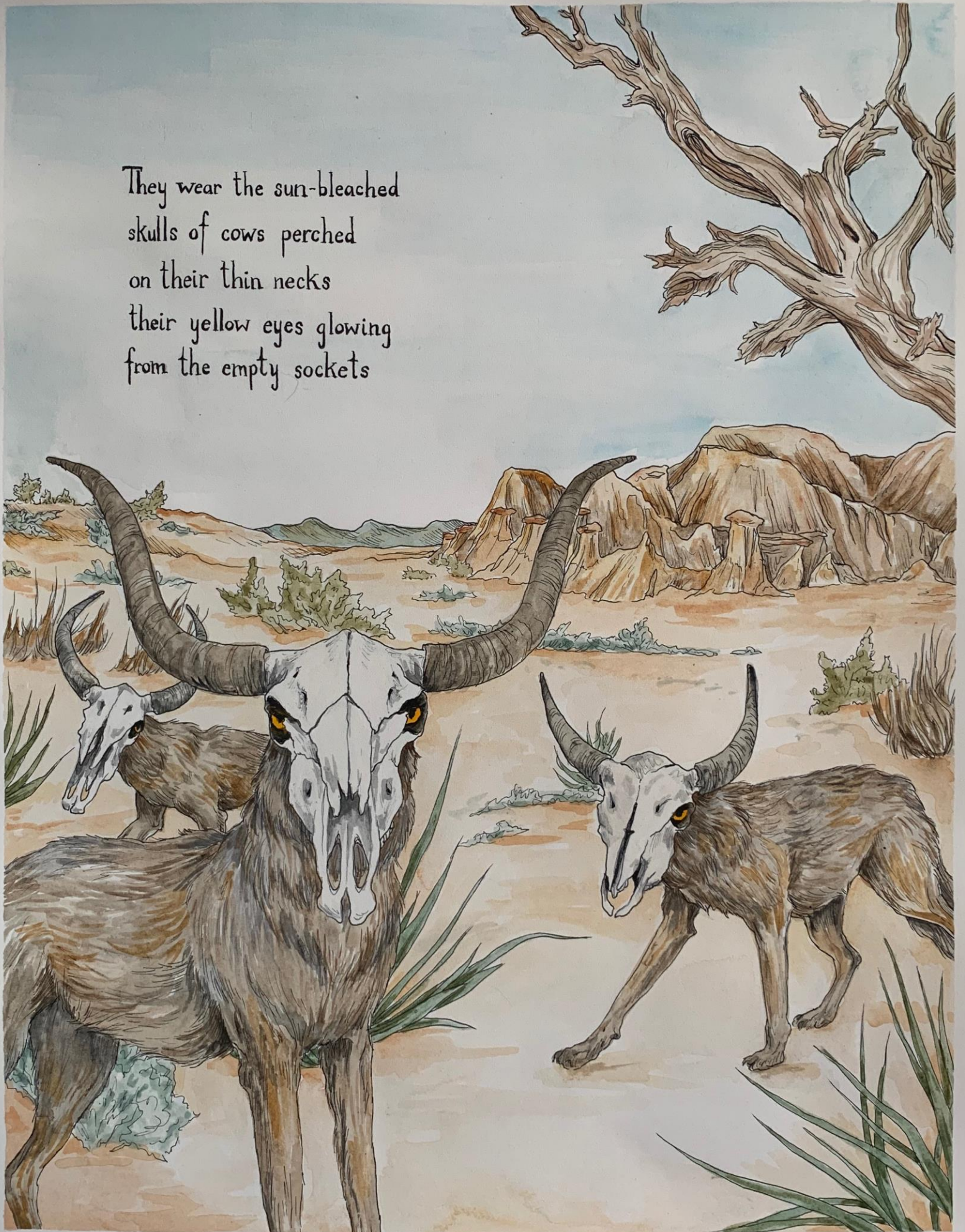


The woman turns her head wildly and the dog flinches. She thought she saw a small body, something wolfish retreating behind a distant sage bush, but it must have been one of the great desert ravens that have been following them for the past day. A coyote mirage. They come again and again to the woman, in her dreams and her hallucinations. Sometimes she sees them disappearing over the crest of a hill or pacing behind them in the arroyos, darting in and out among the pinõn trees. The dog sees the mirage coyotes too, sometimes they have their heads, sometimes they wear the sun-bleached skulls of cows perched on their thin necks, their yellow eyes glowing from the sockets and torn pieces of fabric hanging from their dry, cracked horns. He growls low in his throat.

As she sits there, the woman now sees a gleam in her dog's eyes that wasn't there before. The woman shifts uneasily. She fears she's going mad. Driven mad by hunger, mad by necessity, mad from the mirages that haunt the corners of her eyes. She drums her fingers in the dusty red earth and licks her lips. She can't help but think of her daughter. She was the one that brought her the dog, said she needed company in her old age now that her father was gone. She had held the dog out to her, so small you could cup him in your palms, a wrinkled pink alien-looking thing. He'd curled into her chest and fastened himself there. But now there is a gleam in his eyes that she has never seen in all their years together and she wonders.

The woman hallucinates that she has been liquefied into sweet, sweet water, and she spills over the dry, cracked earth. She imagines that her dog limps over and licks her up with his pink tongue and she slides down his pink throat and sinks into him like a stone. It's dark inside my dog, she thinks. She has to shake her head to disperse all that black from the corners of her eyes and to stop the sound of the hum and beat of her dog's ribcage from ringing in her ears.

They wear the sun-bleached
skulls of cows perched
on their thin necks
their yellow eyes glowing
from the empty sockets



it's dark inside my dog,
she thinks



Soon it is time to go on, crossing further into starvation, closer to a river named Salvation over the rolling foothills. If they can find the river, they can find the car, but the woman's confidence is waning steadily. The woman holds the dog in her arms, but there is a tightness in her grip that wasn't there before.

As they pass through the desert that is slowly but surely turning into a dreamscape of their own delusion, monsoons emerge over distant mountains. One evening, as they lay down to sleep, a storm passes over head. Lightning is exchanged between clouds, illuminating the night in quick bursts of an eerie, almost florescent glow before fading back into black. Always followed by a deafening display of thunder. Cold rain pummels down and the woman has just enough energy to twist the cap of the canteen open, allowing drops to clink against its cool metal mouth and dribble in. The dog lets the rain accumulate in beads on the fur of his snout and his strong whiskers as it drips onto his tongue.

As the storm continues to alight the sky, the dog hallucinates that the woman is Zeus. Her grey eyes like stone, absent of all the love and warm regard which they once bestowed on him. There is electricity buzzing about her white hair, zapping from her mouth and making her worn shirt dance with electric life. The cold winds of the storm which flow over them seem to blow from her outstretched, wrinkled hands, leaving him trembling and shuddering.

His stomach is concave and if he had the energy to crane his neck, he would see the crests and canyons of his ribcage poking through patchy, soaked fur. He knows that the bodies of man can stand for much longer without food than the bodies of dog. He knows he will surely die first, and probably soon. He doesn't know how many more days he can last.

If dogs could shed tears.

as the storm continues to alight the sky
the dog hallucinates
that the woman is Zeus



He wonders if the woman will leave him here, maybe bury him in the sands of an arroyo or under the snarled, snaky branches of a juniper tree. He doesn't want to be left here, amongst all the other dead things. Nor does he wish for the woman to carry him on after he's gone limp in her arms. The dog decides he doesn't want to die like this.

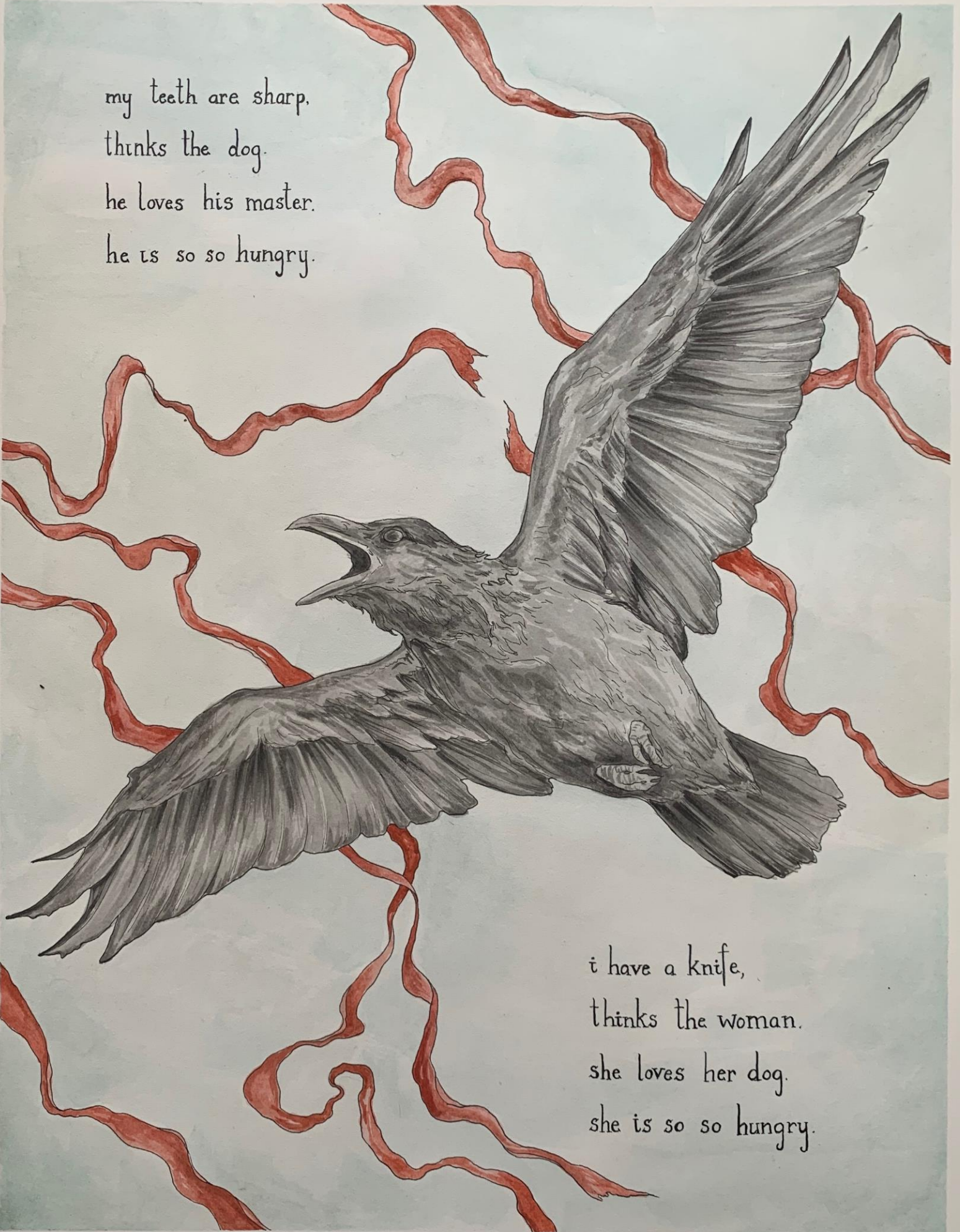
He was loyal. Now he's starving.

Another day comes and again, the dog is grasped in the weakening grip of the woman's arms. Her hands are swift, my teeth are sharp, thinks the dog. I am carnal, I am beastly, perhaps her love will stay her hands, perhaps my love will halt my bite. He loves his master. He is so, so hungry.

I have a knife, thinks the woman. She knows that humans can last longer than dogs without food. She wonders if this is right, if it is better for him to be gone away than to be here. Maybe she is his death, his mercy. The woman knows the hunting knife sits quietly in the pocket of the backpack. She loves her dog. She is so, so hungry.

There is little time to make a decision. If the woman goes on carrying the dog, she will continue to struggle and stumble and there is no guarantee she will not quit on one of the hill crests and go tumbling into an arroyo, lost among the dry shrubs and crumpled snake skins. If the dog goes on without the woman, the strength of having something in his stomach will allow him time for his leg to heal, but there is no guarantee he will make it out of this desert either. It seems that at the end of this infernal desert – the elusive place they have been dragging themselves to powered by pitiful hope – death waits for them. Like the merchant fleeing to Samarra, the dog and the woman cannot seem to outrun that which has been stalking them from the moment they lost their food to the coyotes.

my teeth are sharp.
thinks the dog.
he loves his master.
he is so so hungry.



i have a knife,
thinks the woman.
she loves her dog.
she is so so hungry.

They continue to look at one another, each with a gleam in their eye. If the woman's head wasn't still spinning, if the dog's heart wasn't beating so fast, they might have noticed the slow approach of greenery emerging in the middle-distance. They are too busy looking at each other with hunger and murder in their eyes.

They move together, simultaneously. The woman reaches behind for the hunting knife that lies in the pocket of the backpack. The dog arches his back, thrusting his head forward at the woman's throat. His teeth just miss her, for without both the woman's hands supporting him, the dog starts to slip from her grasp. They struggle with each other as they fall to the ground and the force of their combined movement pushes them backwards, and again, they find themselves falling frantically.

When they reach the bottom, the woman stands to face her dog and the dog stands to face the woman, but they each feel something wet dripping down their brows and pulling at their feet. The dog shakes his head. The woman wipes her eyes. Water. They look around and they see the river, sparkling and yet murky, into which they have just fallen. The woman sees the dog lose his grip on the river floor and he – resigned – floats away from her with the small strength of the river's meek current. The woman watches him drifting away and, with tears dripping down her cheeks, she leans back effortlessly into the small river, and lets the water carry her after the dog.

The dog watches the sky pass unceremoniously overhead, clouds making up a trailing procession as he is carried along with the waves. His mind is still muddled with the adrenaline and energy of his attempt at the woman's life. Love in a poor climate can so quickly turn to violence. To delusion. To desperation.

the woman watches him drifting away
and, with tears dripping down her cheeks,
she leans back effortlessly into the small river
and lets the water carry her after the dog



The woman sees the brilliant sun twinkling through the thin branches of the trees that line the banks. She feels the river as it bends and straightens and bends again underneath her, and the woman knows where it will lead them. They are saved.

But the woman doesn't feel saved.

The dog lies curled in his bed by the window and the woman rests in her armchair in the corner of the room. She's rubbing her finger, the splint that had helped the broken bone heal was taken off at the doctor's this morning and she can still feel the phantom press of the metal on her old skin. The fur on the dog's leg is still slightly shorter from when they had to shave it for the surgery. His back leg is encased in gauze. He tries to sleep, but he is still so uneasy.

The woman is reading a book, listening quietly to the sounds of her daughter in the kitchen preparing them all dinner, and yet she feels a weight on her shoulders.

From across the room, the dog looks at the woman and the woman looks at the dog. True, there is no longer a hungry gleam in their eyes, but there is now only a memory, a dim shadow, of that former tenderness. All that is left now is the distant smell of dirt and flesh, and the tension that exists between two beings who have fallen out of love.

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