

FIVE PLOTS / ERICA TRABOLD

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ERICA TRABOLD

SENECA REVIEW BOOKS

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Most names and some identifying

details have been changed.



*For my family, adopted, biological, near, and abroad,
and for my parents, who fed me stories to tell.*

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CANYONEERING

WHEN I WAS A YEAR OLD,

my parents took me to see a cavern underneath New Mexico. The subterranean temperatures must have been a cool welcome in the midst of dry desert heat; the rocks moist, theatrically lit, gorgeous in their expositions of grandeur bare naked. My parents say I didn't cry, didn't sleep, just stared at those formations, wide-eyed and unafraid.

Because it was so unusual, they have told me about our trip and my behavior dozens of times. I don't ask for careful explanation. I assume I have always been attracted to the mysterious, adopting family stories as part of my own. In my memory, they are solidified.

During our trip to New Mexico, someone knocked on the door of our hotel room all night looking for his dealer. I am imagining it dingy: the lingering smell of cigarettes and whatever else on the curtains and carpet, one bed, scratchy sheets, a square patch of floor that hasn't been vacuumed in weeks. My father unlocks the deadbolt and opens the door, the chain still attached. *Are you sure he's not here?* My father says no, but this customer is persistent. He goes on knocking

even after my father has shut him out a second time. The three of us try to ignore the noise for the remaining hours of the night, but my parents don't sleep, their anxiety projected onto the man outside. Tomorrow, they will introduce me to my biological grandfather for the first time.

*

Rocks are all ghost. In the true darkness of caverns, they shriek, shape-shifting and inspiring fear until I am unsure of what I see by the glow of my own lantern. I cling to what I have been told, that rocks are finite, rocks are ancient, rocks were created by the accumulation of the dead stacked on one another: an ocean, dried; a species, extinct; a forest, fallen; an entire world, cemented into stone. A nocturnal predator—the realization that I haven't yet illuminated enough to live properly in the world—stalks me in every canyon, every cave of consciousness. By the beam of a single light underneath the Chihuahuan Desert, I feel the dead have awakened, swirling in a haze around my eyes, choking out what I thought I knew about living.

I am back in the cave, an adult, and I think I understand it better now. A primitive ladder, wooden steps and broken wire that early explorers used to lower themselves into the void, hangs in the darkness, its shape barely visible. Half of

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its rungs have fallen to the floor—those remaining, loosely strung together. Broken, the ladder serves as a reminder of our common ancestry. The average human being used to be fearless, requiring no tether. She believed in logic, studied the earth, thrived in her own allegory, a cave. She learned best by doing. She cleaned her own wounds. Strangely, it feels as if she has been in stasis, trapped here watching the water evaporate then return more slowly from the mountaintops, dripping through the cracks. It goes on like this until she no longer recognizes the faces, the people she once knew. And by then, it is already too late: Dust and dead specks of flesh have changed the composition of the ecosystem, and evolution has worked on her brain slowly enough to erase the memories—what she had for breakfast three hundred years ago.

*

My father once told me he never wished anyone to live in an orphanage, and that is all he said about his adoption. I find it difficult to ask about the experience because of how shaken he looked in that moment, entranced, perhaps by a memory—a grown man so far removed from the traumas of childhood. Occasionally, he would make mention of what preceded the adoption, his mother's death, but there was never

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much talk about those who went on living—his father, himself, his six young siblings—who were divided under the certainty of poverty if they remained a family. The tragedy was inevitable, unbearable, even when he considered it happening to someone else.

*

To the modern mind, the cave has always been a wild place. When I was in there, I turned my head in the dark, heard a rock growl and say it *liked* living like an animal. This boulder, twice the size of any bear, echoed through everything, even me. He had to have been enormous in life, a combination of prehistoric bacteria and seafood and mammals, now part of the cave itself. I imagined all the chemical reactions inside the stomach of that bear, frozen in time, turning red as they solidified, all that blood and salmon flesh that buried into rock the story of a life.

Light has a way of changing everything. The intricate muscles of his eyes, like mine, died long ago. The bear always had to feel his way through the dark, and the staleness of sea level made him realize he didn't particularly want to. Instead of caverns, he preferred canyons, the endless void, the outright destruction of something that he could see with-

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