

Cry Night

It's more effective outside: the rough wood of the bench against the back of your sunburned legs; the mingled scent of woodsmoke and bug spray and adolescent sweat; the strum of acoustic guitars, chords fading gently into the enfolding dark of trees.

Outside is more organic: no artifice, no microphones, no blinking in too-bright fluorescents or stacking chairs afterwards. Outside, the soft shh, shh of the waves lapping on the dock takes you back to your mother's heartbeat in the womb.

"This place is special, isn't it?" muses the pastor, gazing up at the ink-dark sky with a just-perceptible expression of wonder. "It is so easy to stray away from God, to get distracted by the world, but up here, we're reminded of his love, his creation, his plan for us." Without looking away from the stars, he starts to sing, "Draw me close to you..." and all of your voices, reedy and sincere in the expanse of the campfire circle, echo: "draw me close to you, never let me go..."

You are fourteen years old, and at the end of a gut-wrenching week of unexpected and all-consuming homesickness, and as you sing you wrap your arms tight around your torso. The week has left you feeling raw and inadequate: not pretty enough to catch a boy's eye at the masquerade last night, hopelessly slow and clumsy in field games, confused by the traditions and inside jokes that flow naturally from the lifers.

But here, at the bonfire, you can feel God's presence: telling you that you are loved, and forgiven, and named. God always feels this way here at camp, the way he never feels anywhere else. He felt this way when you were six, here for a church retreat, and he felt this way when you were here last

year for your Christian elementary school's outdoor education week, and though everything else feels awkward and wrong this week he still feels right.

At home, you are the pastor's daughter, always visible, church members stopping you to tug at a too-short hem or comment on an embarrassing story in a sermon. You know all the answers in Bible study, sing harmony in the pew next to your mother, can read aloud from the King James Version without stumbling over a single "sayeth." At home God is a full-time job, and while the work keeps you busy you constantly dread that your heart isn't fully in it.

But here, you're just another voice in the darkness, singing "You are my desire, no one else will do."

And as you sing, you cry, cry like you've been crying in the cabin and the bathroom and the woods, but here you don't have to be embarrassed or make excuses, here your tears mean you're doing it right, so you cry and you sway and you sing.

At home, you hate altar calls. Your dad doesn't do them, at least, but you're subjected to them all the time, at school assemblies, at youth rallies in rented auditoriums, and they always feel manipulative and cheap and awkward. When you got baptized, it was after months of careful study, the result of a thoughtful decision. You would never admit it, but you're proud of the levelheadedness of that choice, the intellectualism. At home, you don't like it when people unfold their bodies from the dusty pink upholstered pews and share their testimonies, voices thick and swollen with feeling. At home, you never lift up your hands.

But here, you aren't trapped in your head or your body. You are breath and salt water and music, a tributary flowing into a lake shining under the moon.

Four years later, you're back at that fire again. You're a counselor now, and it's the sixth week of the summer. Days of rain finally let up this morning, and the kids are cranky and tired, picking at bug bites and clicking their flashlights on and off.

Your feet are coated with grit from the mud on the root-ruptured path. Your hoodie reeks of smoke and sunscreen. You still feel awkward and ugly and out of place, but you have friends here too, and as the twins stand up to play God and Satan in the same skit that they've done every Friday since you got here, you smirk at Amy over the campers' heads and she smirks back.

Soon comes the pastor, and the invocations, and that same old song, and the kids are sniffling and swaying right on cue, but you are not crying. You are singing "You're all I want," and staring at the way the second guitarist, Matt Anderson, moves his graceful fingers across the strings, and imagining them on your body. You aren't crying, but you're still grateful for the darkness concealing the glint of lust on your face, sharp and exposed.

You don't cry at the fire, but you cry constantly that summer: when the camp director yells at you for mistakes he made, and when you find out Matt has a girlfriend back at university, and when the exhaustion pools at the base of your spine until it hardens into a mass that exerts its own gravitational force.

And there are tears in your eyes, late at night, when you and Amy lie with your backs on the cool speckled limestone of the Canadian Shield, away from the kids and the performance and the noise, and you see a meteor streak across the sky: perfect, ephemeral, alive. No one is preaching out here, but you think of the Psalms, think “the stars are the dust of His feet.”

Later the stars will turn to heartless clusters of fire, but tonight, though faint and distant, they still sing.

Later you will take graduate seminars on medieval mysticism and teach passages from the Book of Margery Kempe.

Later you will learn helpful words like “affect,” and “deconstruction,” and “queer.”

But right now you are six and thirteen and fourteen and eighteen, and you are alone in the universe, and God is holding you.