

## Ash and Soil

It always surprised her: the ease with which grass could be pulled from the earth. As a grouping, it appeared as one large mass of life, cohesive and intertwined. Yet each individual blade could so easily be pulled away, their roots no further than a few inches down, an almost superficial grounding. Even worms burrowed further, at least until drowned by the rains. When her mother had first tried to plant her daisies, they had all too quickly withered, their roots weak, as though the soil itself rejected them. Her mother was merely disappointed, but Elizabeth had found it deeply cruel. Grass and brush were so easily accommodated, trees had rooted there for years, even weeds made their bitter homes in the dirt of this new home, yet there was no room for her mother's daisies?

In her right hand, Elizabeth held a small glass bottle, tinted black, and filled with ash. In her left, she clutched a small black book, the same book that her mother used to read from and curse as it stubbornly refused to be deciphered. Liz had long waited for the day her mother might pass on its knowledge, so that she might have her turn with its mysteries. By the time she had begun to do so, however, her illness had not left them much time.

“This one means: ‘to separate.’” She pointed at the glyph weakly, then stopped to cough. For a second, she raised her arm to point again, but Elizabeth motioned for her to rest, and pointed for her.

“I’ve been trying to figure some of it out myself. This one means ‘to combine,’ right?”

Her mother nodded in response.

“Almost. It’s more specific, like... like, ‘to mix things so that they become one.’ So they’re... they should be...” She floundered for the word.

“Inseparable?” Liz suggested. Her mother smiled back at her.

“Yes. You always did catch on quick.” She looked at Elizabeth for a few moments before her focus seemed to drain away, and her eyes drifted to the hospital wall behind her.

It was always strange to return home, not so much because of the things that changed, but because of the things that hadn’t. The dining room looked as though it had been transplanted from her memories into the present day, from the wooden chairs, to the dingy window, to the dark stain that had once been drops of blood from her first night there. Her parent’s room was much the same, with the exception of a few new books on her father’s nightstand, and the same could be said of the kitchen.

“What do you think she has?” She queried. Her father pondered the question for a moment.

“I have no idea. Neither do the doctors, or at least, they don’t seem to think it’s worth explaining to me.”

“But you have a right to know, don’t you? Shouldn’t you at least *want* to know?” She gave him a concerned look. His only response was a weak shrug.

The mortician had broken down the whole process to her and her father, but the explanation was foggy in her memory, save for the end. Skin and hair and tissue was all burned down, 'til all that remained was bits of bone. Finally, even that was ground down with a small tool and mixed in, like she had done many years ago with with berries and pebbles and plant seeds and dreams. She had looked over at her father to see a face made of clay, each layer of memory pressed down and combined until all that was left was a singular mixture with no discernable expression. She wondered if he ever thought about the daisies, and whether ash could make soil richer.

Elizabeth scattered the ashes, as per her mother's request. The location was up to her, so she did so in the garden, among the daisies and flowers and grass and the old tree. She scattered them more or less at random. After all, in the end, everything was condensed into one consistent mixture of ash. There was no way to discern any particular organ or memory, nor any history. It was all the same mixture, inseparable.

“This is the one glyph I managed to figure out on my own. Your mother knew the part before it referred to the past, and later on it starts to talk about the future, but she could never deduce this one glyph.”

“So, what does it mean then?” Elizabeth asked, intensely curious.

“It's a glyph that means 'memory.' Or more specifically, the memories that make up a person.” He leaned back again, basking in remembered pride. Elizabeth stared at the glyph, and imagined trying to decipher it. The shape of the glyph was thin in the middle, with a circular

head, and several dashes down below of varying length. She wondered if the shape had any significance.

It reminded her of her mother's daisies.

JACKSON V.O.

There was also one more tryout. But I think that one might be a joke. I don't think it's even a real sport. It can't be, right?

INT. GYM - AFTERNOON

Jackson stands outside the gym near the poster board in his athletic wear, looking at the list of sports dejectedly. All of them have stamps now that say "Tryouts Complete." All except one, which has the title "LEAPFROG TEAM TRYOUTS." Jackson is the only person signed up.

The door to the gym opens and behind it is the COACH, he is tall, slightly overweight and clearly hasn't shaved in a while. He is wearing gym shorts, a whistle, and a baggy T-Shirt with the words "It's happy hour somewhere" written on the front. He looks down at Jackson and speaks gruffly.

COACH

You the kid that signed up?

JACKSON

Uhh, actually, I think-

COACH

Get in here.

He slaps a big sticker onto the front of Jackson's shirt that says "Contender #1," then he grabs Jackson by the shoulder and drags him into the gym. He roughly pushes him into the center of the gym and pulls out a clipboard, which he begins writing on.

Jackson looks around and notices three kids on the bleachers, including the LANKY KID, the STRONG KID, and a NEW GIRL looking him up and down. He shrinks into himself a bit.

The coach, not really looking at Jackson, begins to make a declaration.

COACH

Alright kid, my name is Coach Roberts, welcome to Leapfrog Tryouts.

The Lanky Kid on the bleachers lets out a woop.

LANKY KID

YEAH, LEAPFROG!

The Strong Kid shushes him, and the New Girl glares.

NEW GIRL

Shut up.

Jackson looks at them, confused.

COACH ROBERTS

Listen up, we're the William Henry-Harrison Dugongs, this school's one and only competitive leapfrog team. Tell me kid, how much do you know about competitive leapfrog?

JACKSON

uhhh...

INTERVIEW:

COACH ROBERTS

Competitive leapfrog is a game with an extensive role in the history of the upper lower eastern mid-west.

Roberts pulls out a scrapbook titled "WHY WE LEAP." On the cover is what appears to be a portrait of early American Quaker with a long, fabulous beard, who is leapfrogging over another Quaker, whose face is not visible. The drawing is then blown up to the full screen while Roberts continues talking. Pleasant music is played, such as might be heard in a Ken Burns documentary.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

Invented in 1672, George Fox developed the game of leapfrog around the principles of the Quaker religion.

A portrait of George Fox is Shown.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

He developed the game to be an alternative to the popular children's game of ring toss,

Another drawing, this time of Quaker children tossing rings over some pins.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

which he believed to be too sexually suggestive, and a gateway to sin.

The same image is shown, but now with crude drawings of evil spirits, and the devil is drawn on the background, there is a lightning crack and sinister laughter.

The image shifts to a happy drawing of children and adults playing leapfrog together.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

The game was a massive success, to the point that even adults began to participate.

Another image, this one a photograph of a man with a top hat and mustache in a suit.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

Around two-hundred years later, the very first competitive leapfrog rule-set was pioneered by Arthur Natterjack.

Image of a strike outside a Ford Factory.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

Natterjack was Henry Ford's right hand man, and when the workers union went on strike, Ford demanded he put a stop to it.

Another photograph, this time of union workers playing leapfrog against a team of well-dressed businessmen.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

Natterjack challenged the Union to a game of leapfrog with a ruleset agreed upon by both parties.

A photo of Natterjack slamming into the ground while the Union members celebrate.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

Things go poorly for Natterjack, and the Union won. So Natterjack was fired, and Ford hired a team of union busters to disrupt the strike, attempting to have the event wiped from the history books.

Now a color photo, seemingly taken not too long ago.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

But since that day, the Union began celebrating with a yearly game of competitive leapfrog, a tradition they passed down for years, until it entered the public sphere.

Photos of various students playing leapfrog at gyms, schools, and holding trophies and ribbons.

COACH ROBERTS V.O.

These days leapfrog is more than just a tradition, its a calling, with students from all across the northern to eastern Midwest participating in competitions for honor and glory.

Coach Roberts is now closing up the book. Tears in his eyes, beginning to sniffle and wipe his face. He looks up at the camera.

COACH ROBERTS

It's more than just a game. It's part of our *souls*.

He wipes away another tear. Then he reaches into his shirt and pulls out a silver flask with an engraving of a frog on it.

COACH ROBERTS

I just think about it all, and, and the history, and I, it's just so, so-

He takes a large gulp from the flask.

COACH ROBERTS

It's so inspiring. You know?

SCENE:

Jackson is still standing in the gym, he seems confused, but positioned to begin some sort of trial.

COACH ROBERTS

This is your first test. Daryl! Into position!

The Strong Kid on the bleachers gets up and runs to the middle of the gym, getting down on the floor in position to be leapfrogged over.



## The Day Sam Whittaker Lost His Eyes

It was a warm summer's day when little Sam Whittaker lost his eyes. He certainly hadn't intended to, so proud his mom was of the dark brown marbles in his skull. He had been chasing a particularly evasive red butterfly when he tumbled down a grassy hill, thrown head over heels by the indifferent neglect of gravity. Even after pulling himself upright, it took little Sam a moment to puzzle out why the world had gone dark. For a minute, he thought perhaps someone had extinguished the sun itself, until he reached up to his face and realized, to his horror, that his eyes had popped right out of their sockets!

Thankfully Joan Whittaker, with all the mothering instincts that a careless child inspires, was thoroughly eager to yank back her son from any and all adversity. She was entirely prepared to leap into action even before her now blind son rounded the corner and slammed into a fencepost. He made a sound not unlike a dimwitted cow, inspiring Joan to leap from her porch, hoping to silence his cries before the neighbors took notice.

"Oh sweetie, it's ok, it's alright, do tell mother what happened." She cooed gently into his ear, until he lapsed into blissful silence

Then Sam uncovered his face and Joan Whittaker screamed loudly enough to disturb even the most hard-of-hearing neighbors. It was now Sam's turn to comfort his mother, which he did by patting her knee with one hand and staring up at her with his newly-exposed eye sockets. It took some time for Joan to calm herself, but when she did, it was quickly decided that this state of affairs would simply not do.

"I will not allow my son to go blind while he has two perfectly good eyes just laying around in the countryside! Imagine how filthy they'll get! Rolling around in the grass and dirt!"

She remarked, shuddering at the thought. So the two of them returned to the hill, Joan leading her son by the hand as he struggled to keep pace. When they finally arrived however, the task was not so easy as she had imagined. They spent hours at the base of the hill, Joan using her fine toothed comb to part the grass, and Sam rolling around in dirt, growing accustomed to life without eyes. Soon enough it was nearly sunset, and Joan found herself wondering if perhaps she could raise an eyeless child after all, watching as her tripped on a rock and fell face first into the earth. She was cleaning the dirt out of Sam's eye socket with a bent Q-tip when she noticed a cave, sitting just a short distance away.

Joan, having just about exhausted all her energy, mustered the energy for one last search attempt. They walked into the cave together, Joan clutching her son's hand ever tighter, afraid of the dark. Sam, having no way to distinguish between light and dark, of course, suddenly broke away, skipping further into the cave.

"Sam! Wait for mother!" She called, but to no avail. Joan stamped after him in a huff. "You'd think the boy's ears had fallen off as well!" Wandering further, she heard the sounds of Sam laughing, and another sound, almost like a pig's grunt. At the end of the cave, Joan found her son giggling at an angry little goblin, who clutched in his hands two small, marble shaped objects.

"Listen here you little brat! I want you out of my home right now!"

"Don't talk to him like that you brute!" Joan peered through the dark, seeing a flash of brown in the goblin's hand. "You're the one who took my son's eyes aren't you! I demand you give them back at once!" She clenched her hands into tight fists, frustration and exhaustion manifesting as fiery anger.

The little green goblin became enraged, sputtering and kicking up rocks. Sam guffawed at the sounds of the angry little figure.

“I found these eyes fair and square lady! I’m going to do whatever I damn well please with them, and if you don’t like it, then you can jus-” his sentence was cut off, interrupted by the force of Joan’s fist smashing into his face. For a minute, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh delighted Sam, who clapped and giggled as his mother beat the little goblin to death.

Joan finished the unpleasant task, then kneeled down and let out a long sigh. The physical effort of killing another being, even something as small and weak as the goblin, had absolutely tuckered her out, and she needed a minute to regain her composure before picking Sam’s eye up off the cave floor. To her dismay, she discovered the other eye had been crushed, perhaps by the goblin during his fit of rage, or by herself in her retaliation, which Joan felt was also, in many ways, the goblin’s own fault. The thought gave her an idea, and in a brief flash of genius, she reached over and plucked out one of the goblin’s eyes, it was just about the same size as Sam’s, but with a shimmering green iris. It was only fair that she take it, as reparation for the careless destruction of what was rightfully theirs.

Joan pulled Sam out of the cave by his hand, leading him away from the ugly lump that had once been the goblin. Once they were outside she kneeled down in front of him with the eyes. She wondered briefly which eye should go in which socket, before determining that it probably didn’t matter. Slowly and delicately she popped each eye into place. Sam blinked, going cross-eyed for a moment while his vision returned, and then smiled politely up at Joan.

“Now Sam, what do you say when someone helps you?” She crooned.

“Thank you, mom.” He responded in a sickly-sweet mimicry of gratitude. Joan smiled at him, proud of her son’s exquisite manners. She took his hand, and together they walked home, back to safety and normalcy, and far away from any caves, goblins, and unpleasantness.