

## Little Gods

Gods cannot exist without a resting place, without a small overlap of the cosmos and earth. If there is no place for them take up residence, how should they know us? When I was little enough to fit into the shelter of my mother's arms, and she would tell me that, I would imagine gyres of starlight funneling into our temples. Filling, warming, coalescing to the brim of the stone temple we visited every week. And if I felt the warmth across the even, firm building blocks, maybe I was feeling a god's breath. And I waited to know the heartbeat of something wonderful.

The thing was, the temple, really temples in general, were only supposed to exist in my childhood. Childish things; watercolor dreams of grandeur for a someday, aren't supposed swirl in your head until your heart hurts, it's not supposed to be the end of every question. But there was my temple built with my favorite pastel stones (like rainbow fish scales). Framed in moss and standing atop the sand gravel island on our part of the Arkansas river, burns under my eyelids with every blink. I've been scorched by something on the inside.

The best thing about me as a child, was the temple, *my* temple. How many times did teachers ask me a fun fact about myself, and I said in my baby know-it-all voice, *I* have a temple. The reaction I usually got, is utterly satisfying now to think about. Mostly because I can retroactively, pinpoint every facial movement to a running script in my head.

Teacher (mid 40s, permed hair, makeup too good for a classroom, a pained and painted smile lines her face): Oh you...do, your family has a temple? There's a tilt of the head. They're running through last names in their mind, mine doesn't have a ring. Because if someone *has* a temple, that means your family is one of the big names, tied to big money, because temples are a big deal to run. The sacrifices, the priests, the maintenance and custodial staff, the prayer leaders,

the chefs to prepare the sacrifices just right. Not only that, but ambassadors from one god to another, the officials to control worshipers, donation receivers, the accountants, the mindless attendants. It's endless.

So no, my family did not have one of those temples to run. What we did have, was maybe a glorified tree-house, in memory. Perhaps a hidey-hole for wild animals went we weren't around. We certainly had something that I was concerningly and unabashedly proud of. As a child, I really thought a god would move in. A nice one too. Of course, not a powerful one like the gods in New York City, where the great gods of the Atlantic and the wind of the North Atlantic Drift, sit up in their concrete thrones. Make business deals and roll dice on whether it'll snow in England as soon as October. Or the Gulf Stream will by to stir up a hurricane, as it says hello.

I still had the audacity to hope something with a pulse of existence would permeate our beloved alcove. Maybe a forest fire had displaced some household gods, and one would make its way to us. Or maybe our temple was really a rest stop, a motel 6, even for the traveling god. On its way to a new vocation. I knew that it couldn't hold much, but *something* must know how lovely it was.

The temple was my dearest wish from when I was a child. The year the Arkansas river furlled into a bubbling conveyor belt that tore chunks of road into itself, I prayed a river god to attach itself to the river. Maybe we could please it, and it could control the river.

The way we found the temple was hardly special. Nothing about the temple was supposed to be special, just mine, if anything. Every Sunday as a little girl, older than fitting into the cradle of my mother's arms. But younger than crossing the banks of the river alone, my father and I dragged our gnarled, oak canoe into the shallow and rocky banks of the Arkansas

river. Paddling against the simmering current, Dad and I would meander all day. At some point we would stop and eat our lunch of tuna sandwiches and fruit snacks. That's how I found the plot for the temple; Dad told me to keep an eye out for some place that felt, for us. It's been so many years now, that I can't remember why he wanted somewhere special. Or maybe he just wanted a place to eat, and I wanted someplace special. Maybe like tea parties in the garden. Like watching archeological documentaries every Friday together. Like doing side walk chalk competitions in the middle of winter. Like chamomile tea and my head in his lap when I was sick.

However, my eyes got glazed over with sun. And instead, I got caught up in the kaleidoscope of blue and wandered off in my head. At some point we had been drifting for so long that the current swirled us into the choked-off point leading into our little island. It was a decent slope of granite pebbles, guarded by pine trees and brambles.

The first time we had been there, Dad took off his baseball hat, ruffled his wheat colored hair, and declared that this place was full something. And how could it not be? Our home up river, knew itself that something was missing. The Something, was my mother. She was the life-force that filled-up every corner. The universe knew it too; little gods, warm breezes and golden sunshine followed where she went. Her smile was a temple the gods felt worthy to stay in. But when she left, so did all the gods that I knew. The house creaked as old bones do when the heart of a thing is stripped away.

The little island was beautiful the way my Mother had been. Through the mosaic of light in the Aspen trees, soft light filtered through. The rocks were jewel-toned and smooth. When I stood at the very top of it, the edge of the world came up to greet me. I had never gulped so much of the world at once. Who knows when, but Dad said we should offer something to the island for letting us stay with it so often. We didn't want it to grow a thicket of thorns and ivy, did we?

Since Mother had left, I didn't know much about gods, but I did know they were mercurial at best. Although, I seriously doubted an actual god cared so much about a glorified sediment deposit. Yet ever dutiful, I gathered up everything on the island that I thought made it best. Choral and storm-colored rocks, supporting a thicket of Aspen tree branches. We then attached nice vine-curtains, and moss roofing to complete our creation. So that day, and every day I came back, I left a part of my lunch there. Hoping beyond wildest hope that some bored god would see it fit to stay in our little temple for a while. That somehow, our offering could be good enough.

Dad promised that someday, one definitely would. Gods were attracted to the rich and gaudy temples, sure. But what about one that was made out of love? When you give all of the scapings of your once-life over to something bigger? Dad once told me, when I had grown into a teenager, that he thought maybe some moseying god would appear, because gods liked children. Riches were fine, but the complete adoration only a child can have for something that doesn't deserve it, must be much better. He had said this, whilst stroking my cheek, eyes tired. I had wondered if he was worried over what undeserving gods I might give myself over to.

Going into high school, no god appeared. Not one. This was an endless source of hilarity for us, because what god *could* appear for us? Soon, it was just a novel joke amongst my friends and I. The year dad went to the hospital though, when he joked about our complacent god apparently not being able to help out, I laughed until I cried. Shoulders shaking, Dad just looked at me, a little hollow. Like a house that has its heart stripped away. He didn't make any promises to me; he knew they were wasted. I was too skeptical and forlorn by the broken heady words of people already. It was that day, that I practically swam through the river as my canoe neared our temple-island. This time, I brought things a god might actually want. All of my Mother's old jewelry; I brought rings, pendants, gold hoop earrings in a plastic bag, curled in my fist. I buried

rings and necklaces desperately in the soil inside the temple. I scattered gems in the shallow creek, and I adorned moss and stone crevices with webs of sterling silver chains. When I used a pocket knife to pluck stones from their settings, I accidentally cut myself, and sprinkled the blood too.

I waited two days.

Nothing.

Maybe if I had been a more rational being, I would have gone to one of the big city temples. The one built onto the side of the hospital even. But it was hard to catch the eyes of those gods. I thought maybe some god had seen our quite devotion to an unknown, that it would do us a favor and give my father some life. I started visiting the temple almost every day, to describe it to dad, but to also leave little folded up notes in the crooks and crannies of the stones.

No god ever came. Dad died in the rainy season, when the river swells, and everyone fears flash flooding, and masses of earth are broken away. And there are no gods to stop it. With nothing on the earth to tether me anymore, I moved from the Colorado mountains. As I began to feel like they were waves about to crash over me.

I decided to move to the real waves instead. I knew Dad would have hated the carnivorous obsidian temples of Los Angeles. But I went to work for one anyways; it housed the god Earthquake. Tempestuous work indeed. Have you ever tried diplomacy between tectonic plates and the ocean? Even when the *god* of diplomacy won't step in? It was a mess. The cold stone walls and tremors left me shaking and brittle. I still stayed. I was a soldier prepared to slosh through the mud of demands. Never complain or compromise was my motto. And I was rewarded for it, I was promoted, and adored by my co-workers. And what shame to have for that? My friends were colleagues, my life was the secrets lives of gods. The hours were long, but

there wasn't more to go home to. There was the notion that I could build something out my work that could be long lasting. A legacy that could stay when I was gone, and if I was never gone, then all the better.

Months, years into it. Longer, than I thought I could endure I had a co-worker tell me that something. He had shifted his weight from side to side, and he said it like a diagnosis: something was slithering under my skin. I laughed at him, *what in the hell did he mean by that?* Do you think I'm an alien in a human suit? No, maybe a spirit taking up rent? We lived in a place where spirits played around, did one sneak in? Was I now hostess to one of our bosses? Such things weren't possible. No matter how high you climbed, it would be ludicrous to think a god would...what? Possess you? Nonsense. And I had told him so. But before he turned away, he gazed at me the way my father had in that hospital. The way a sick person pities another, but they just don't know how much worse they are. And grief can wear you too.

It was only a little later that I heard of the Arkansas river being plugged up by a dam soon. My friends at the River god temple told me there was nothing to be done. Their god was fine with it, several experts, gods, and regular worshipers seemed to approve of it. Why did I seem upset?

That day I took the Earthquake god's offering and threw it over the balcony into the waves below, the very least diplomatic thing I could do. I took a red-eye to Denver, and never looked back. When I arrived at the temple, my face was baked by the sun and blasted by the wind. My throat closed up from exertion and the torment of seeing how shallow the water had gotten. Soon to be depleted into a wasteland. The temple had seen better days, rocks had fallen a way, the aspen thatched roof had caved in a little. But then the breeze stirred up, making the aspen leaves shimmer like coins. And I heard a whisper weaving through it all. It was small, but

it said *come and see*. I wasn't even sure that it was a god at first. I was used to booming, cackling sounds. But the leaves shimmered again, the wind playing with my hair, urging me. I peered into the small covering. I asked it what sort of god it was. Huddled in a corner, it answered, a god of a lot of things. More than one? Wow. I laughed, trying to be friendly, my blood surging through my veins.

Yes, it rushed back.

Like what?

Like warm sandwiches and coke after a canoe ride. Like sidewalk chalk in the snow.

Like Chamomile tea, and someone stroking your face when you're sick. Like finding a place of your very own. I remember standing very still. The wind drying the sweat on my back, chin lifting towards a sob. But no. I find my voice. Did you see us this entire time? I hiss in its direction. Suddenly, I'm screaming with my already dehydrated voice. Why weren't you there when he left? Why are you appearing to me now, broken as I am? I'm no longer innocent, or able to believe in the childish games you play!

The trees only bend, perhaps shamefully. The whispering voice is gone. But I can still feel something encompass me. Like a ray of sun that sits too long on me. I'm a little god it murmurs, I'm quiet, and tired. But I'm still here. I'm still here.

And I hear water over the riverbed. Something new is slowly making its way to the surface. I sit there, for hours, maybe days. I watch the river stream over the old rocks. Like a typewriter, back and forth. Back and forth. Cleaning my feet, and I think about the good things I have scraped off of me when moving. I think, that this might just be home to a Big god.