

The Hiker

Scattered at random throughout the forest are tall evergreens, like the ones you used to decorate with your family back when the holiday season evoked excitement instead of existential dread, only these ones have grown to their greatest potential. They have watched generations live and die and have seen so little of the world, but the earth around them has changed so substantially over the years they feel as if they have seen everything. Their roots, spiteful things condemned to lives with no light, keep them locked in one place just as your roots do, only yours are breakable and you would realise that if you could distinguish roots from shackles. There are no waist-high, limp trees that have barely grown in their leaves and need to be held up with wooden sticks - they do not have a place here. That must mean if you are here that *you* are grown and should not need crutches to stay upright, so let go of the childish desire to be rescued when you have never even known true danger - it is holding you back and you have not grown right for some time now. All it would take for you to save yourself is to stop relishing how it feels not to have fallen but to *be* falling. Get up and stay up. The earth is growing tired of catching you.

You are at a lookout on the summit of a hiking trail, and in this position you should feel larger than everything and everyone but instead it has only made you realise how small you really are. This trail is unfamiliar to you, but this internal hollowness has been so familiar for so long that it is beginning to rot at the edges and is taking the best parts of you with it. This is the part where I'm meant to tell you about a choice this hiker considers making before deciding the possibility of finding joy again is more promising of an option than answering the call of the void. However, I have found myself unable (or unwilling) to write anything more than an introduction. The story stopped feeling like fiction, and while exploitation in the name of art is common and often encouraged, I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable with presenting it as anything other than reality. I should be handing you a character, not a mask. Whether the mask is yours or mine or someone else's makes no difference in this matter. I feel I am writing someone's real story and do not have the right to do so in the way I have begun to.

Fiction at its core is deceit. You are tricked into believing something you otherwise would not. If I hand you a sombre emotional state and write in second person then all of a sudden you're a hiker at a lookout begging to feel something other than hurt, and you begin to feel miserable even if you should feel good. But fiction is often real in the sense it is possible. This story is possible - likely, even. I suppose they always have been but it has taken me this long to realise it.

The hiker was first conceptualised while I was stuffed in the backseat of a busy bus. It was spring but the leaves on the trees outside were still brown and shrivelled and curled into themselves like the cocoons of butterflies. I had spent my day complaining about the itchiness of spring and a longing for a more inspiring time of year, while the leaves had fought for life just long enough to see the first days

of blossoming in a season that did not belong to them. Shortly after that, it occurred to me, they would weaken and break and fall silently and die unobtrusively. They had no choice.

I have always had a choice.

I choose how my story goes, and I choose how the hiker's story goes, and the leaves don't get to tell their own story so I choose how that one goes as well.

The unwritten section of my hiker's story would have presented them with a choice - life or death - and it was around when I reached this roadblock in my writing process that I realised literature is not always a harmless game. I am fictionalising real experiences - the hiker's story hurts to relate to and hurts to write. But if I create a hiker who feels no pain - meaning you feel no kind of way towards them - I have no story. My choice was to accept pain as a consequence for content - that is, until I realised the ways in which I personally related to the story I was writing, and chose not to continue to write it.