The Six Grandfathers

By E.D. Plowe

I squatted between the beige rows of the Cadillac, gripping the seats with my crab claws, a Xanax between my bared front teeth. My grandmother has seventeen red Xanax at the bottom of her purse. She refuses to drink water, only Diet Coke and Sauvignon Blanc. In sync with the F-sharp of the purse unzipping, my mom’s head whips around from the front seat. Her lips part.

“Spit it out now.”

I give a demon delight face, all eye whites. My gums feel clean. I say: Who has water? It comes out: Hur awsh vaver?

My mother cries: “Spit it out! Ma, really?”

“We were having a conversation that doesn’t involve you,” Granna says. “She said she took it before.” My doctor-grandfather nods his head. He swears to God if there’s a mask mandate at this next stop he’s not going in. My dad, statuesque in his man driving pose, adjusts his balls. My mom looks at me like *The Scream* and hands me the shared red Nalgene. I swear it’s been teethed around the rim.

The South Dakota rurality is a dark green sandy glow; from one side of the state to the other, we all remember we’re at the bottom of an ocean scratched up with steel. That’s about as far as the Earth-remembering goes in this family. They love God, life, and family; they cannot remember before the Holocaust, and they certainly cannot remember before white people came to America. My paternal grandmother, a buried Q-tip at West Point, traces her heritage to the cursed pilgrims. The grandfather in this car remembers Hungarian.

But I remember the creeping amoebas, and I remember the rainbow-gray fish. I remember the curly-Q spines on their backs, sometimes grabbable, if you swim fast enough. I remember the fluctuations, Earth’s puberty, heating and cooling, then loosening her muscles to birth us mammals. I remember the giant ferns which smiled if you stood on your tiptoes to peer in. The charisma of the ancient forests recycled by tusks and teeth. I remember so hard that my breath becomes glacial water, amniotic fluid, and blood — I am homesick. Tears soaking into the car fabric draw out a realization: “Oh, I’m having a panic attack.”

The car pulls into the National Monument garage like a beetle in need of shade. We had rented the shiny black Cadillac out of an airport that smelled not like an airport but a rather sweet squat home. Dad grew up in the Dakotas with six siblings who went on to pollinate the U.S. with varying counts of wispy children. The tallest sibling still roams in the Sioux pine trees. She and her children thread their long heads through the rugged granite formations on Needles Highway in bright blue Facebook pictures. My aunt and cousins trail our car, parking beside us at the bottom of Mt. Rushmore.

My whole family gathers their purses and cameras to climb the acre-wide concrete ramp towards Mt. Rushmore. I carry nothing and sway, waiting for them to march. Hot concrete becomes polished tile, and a crowd veers left into a gift shop for plastic bottles of water. Huge state flags billow above the smooth incline to the viewing platform and descending stair auditorium. I peel away to the bathroom, a white box on the other side of the wide way. A V-shaped pattern of teeny black and white tiles supports my sandaled feet.

Then the floor begins to tip to the right. I am sure other people are feeling the tip. I rise up from the toilet, and the floor sinks down. Filling my lungs with air, I assume I am unwell. Each step feels plush, and the gentle tipping and swaying of the space persists as I approach the sink. I check myself in the mirror. Nothing wrong here. Just a short hairstyle I can’t get quite right. Nothing wrong here.

I look from my reflection back down at my feet, my hands under the sink’s spraying water. Out from the pipes of the sinks creeps a shadow, a growing circle of blackness. Surely I’m losing my vision. I squint into the shadow, trying to discern its edges. As my eyes flick to the blob’s border, a powdered munchkin of grainy light appears in its center, and vanishes when I look upon it directly. Little flecks of sand begin jumping from this aperture! I rub my eyes, forgetting my hands are wet. I huff and wipe my face with my t-shirt. A chirping trio of middle school girls turn my head, and when I look back down, the sand-spitting wormhole is gone.

Back out into the sun, there is no tipping or magic. I walk into lumps of plastic bodies, hot dogs, and actual dogs which exhale like pigs. I scan my field. There is a white man, or rather a raisined monk, of about thirty-five selling red books. My older sister is standing in front of this human wrinkle. She purchases his glossy book. A humble gray-haired guru looks at me from the back cover, and I trot towards her. Lucy is beaming. I follow her as she strides back to our family.

She says, “He said I was the embodiment of Shakti — that he saw it in my eyes — isn’t that awesome?”

With the guru in her armpit, Lucy leads us in a procession uphill to gaze upon the four men of America. My grandparents trail my cousins, Nordic giants all above six-foot-two, who’d climbed out of a blue quantum Subaru. They brought their first-grader, Fiona, whose mother is in treatment. Fiona is soon my best friend. She doesn’t know that the Six Grandfathers, the Earth-made, love-made mountain faces, were exploded and scraped away by little white spider-ants to create Mt. Rushmore.

Below the monster American faces is a slope of thick, sharp shadows cast by a gorgeous township of boulders. The boulders, four times my wingspan, wear vests of moss which incandesce despite the midday sun. I gleefully point this out to my family as we walk around the viewing deck. The boulders, smelling of aged rain, then ask me for something more.

I remember that the boulders tower over the original earth-womb of the Lakota Sioux; a long mythological cave hides somewhere. I read about the Six Grandfathers on my phone, scrolling, passing my phone around and receiving back *wow*s, *yup*s, and *the Indians killed the white people too, you know.*

Gazing at their land, two of the Six Grandfathers keep their heads high on each side of the mountain peak, one face erased down the middle. They are not chiseled. They are the natural, quake-sunken eyes and downturned mouths of granite. If you look to President Lincoln’s right, you will see, truly, one open eye. I read that President Grant permitted bounty hunters to pluck the Lakota people from the area for three hundred dollars each during its construction. The Klu Klux Klan helped fund the monument. I look up from my screen. White hoods nod in the sea of pink people beneath the U.S. flags. My family sets off on a loop up the slope.

Fiona, the six-year-old, gives a toothy cackle. She had just tripped and her legs are covered in blood, so she says dumbfoundedly: “Oh well!” Fiona instructs me to hold her hand while her aunt tends to her knee. She is hilarious, and with expertise, surveys the hundreds of people walking the path below the faces of the mountain. She says nothing about them, but listens. As if in a science museum, we circumambulate rock whale heads and fleshy rib cages rising from the earth, all hugged by the light green fleece moss. My little sister, a wise sixteen with a puffy lower lip, smiles so sweetly at me.

Our family once had a magnificent pool with a little terrace of purple butterfly bushes atop it like a real mountainside. Dancing inchworms and pinchable frogs egged me onto the jumping rock. I stood there at three years old, without floaties, preparing to plunge. I was aware of my chest filling and emptying. Then the sound of a horse fly assaulted my periphery with a buzzing that cut to my heart, and I was terror. It bit my ribs and I was stabbed. I howled and from the shallow end, Dad goaded jump, just jump, the fly can’t swim! I howled again, and again.

After a long ride from Mt. Rushmore to a salmon dinner at Dry Gulch, I find myself needing to hold on, toes curled on the edge of the diving board, curled in my sneakers. My grandmother is careful not to trip on the uneven floor at this rooftop restaurant. Six glasses of white wine are placed delicately on a wicker table. No glass is mine. But one sip is all I need in my sandy gullet, and boy, do I need. I look down at the Main Street of Dry Gulch. All I can think of is Wheel of Fortune because there are seven casinos to look at. The neon lights drown any breath of the hills above. Smokers and racists and maybe one lesbian gather outside, spitting. I sip my mother’s wine.

As we rise up from the dinner table to walk the strip below, I announce to my family: “I feel like we’re in a fucked up Disney World.”

I am sick, gone rotten on the inside like the time I ate lamb and thought I was going to hell. I can no longer count my surroundings to ground. My sisters want to check out the shops, and I groan. We walk. I square my shoulders and ask my grandfather to buy me cigarettes. My mother says she doesn’t recognize me. Pa starts walking towards one of the smoke shops, I follow shyly behind. His mother survived on cigarettes lest her Holocaust memory chew up her nervous sinew. I share her spring birthday. With lashing tongues of rope my mother and her mother tug Pa back towards the family group. The sky turns from lapis to black.

Returned to the family circle and shaking his head, Pa says, “Anything that will make her feel better right? Why does it matter, huh? In that much suffering?”

“She needs to be okay with these feelings, and all that we can do is tell her that they’ll pass, just like anything else!” my mom says.

The blackness seeps into the corners of my eyes. I decide to speed away. None of this will pass, I repeat to myself, all will keep repugnantly being. I consider entering a bar or dragging on a stranger’s cigarette or stealing; I need to do anything to be un-familied in this moment, to be un-here, to be un-selfed. How can I *be* when no one knows where they are, let alone who they are? I am guilty, I am terrified, I am on the sidewalk, I am on the sidewalk, I am on the sidewalk, and I skitter like a silverfish to find my family. Lucy first finds me.

“Emma, are you done? …Are you okay?” I nod. “There’s live music just over there,” she says.

I can hardly recognize her face. It is an amalgamation of parts that barely create a coherent object. Her blue eyes are pasted lazily on her pale oval like two little ocean wormholes.

Then my mom comes to decide if she wants to reprimand or comfort me. I can barely stand to look at her. Each crease in my mother’s face is like a ripple of movement away from the center. My mom’s nose doesn’t match her forehead, doesn’t match those same bright ocean sinkholes. Her worry oozes out of her sockets and mixes with the love from her chest and palms, the result is soapy and vile.

“Emma, oh Emma,” she says, a stuffed octopus in her hand, for me.

I try to re-synthesize the Picasso faces, all under the helm of the regular moment, but wholeness only occurs when I rub my eyes. I wish the streetlights would go out, perhaps I could see my family better in starlight.

I roll my eyes into my head, forcing out the street lights. That’s better. My head hits the sidewalk. My family holds my body, watching my breath as my nightmare ends. No crowd gathers around us.

As my lips quiver, I transform, and I scuttle in their arms as a silverfish. My tunnel opens up — quite a relief, a real space to breathe. I have a tunnel, a dim light at its end.

I lift my light legs to the tunnel, tinkling the metal pipe, and in a blink I am in fluorescence, and my body is suddenly thickening and lengthening, then lightening, bubbling, foaming, spooling, landing, dispersing, and absorbing into a pair of wet hands. Ah. Settling into skin. Wet hands loosely hold a yellow snake at a birthday party. So I am the palms cupping the snake, I am the cool snakeskin; I am extremely heavy and long, and heavier and longer. So I am an ancestor, a great boa in green plains alongside geysers of life. This body feels best, a monarch of peace. A lone, great boa, parting grasses and digesting.