

Carried through many nations and over many seas,
I arrive, brother, for these wretched funeral rites
so that I might present you with the last tribute of death
and speak in vain to silent ash
Since Fortune has carried away from me you in the flesh.
Alas, poor brother, unfairly taken away from me,
now in the meantime, nevertheless, these things which in the ancient custom of ancestors
are handed over as a sad tribute to the rites
received, dripping much with brotherly weeping.
And forever, brother, hail and farewell.
-- Catullus 101

The Potamoi

My brother, Bob, and his friends, brothers Joey and Tip Karlsson, had planned to spend the weekend canoeing and kayaking the Rappahannock River. The river would carry them past farmland marked by Civil War skirmishes and wildlife management areas tangled in greenbrier. Warning signals spread as beavers slapped tails and kingfishers gave rattled calls. These young men, ages eighteen to twenty-two, knew that once they passed the confluence of the Hazel River, the water would get a little rough and tumbly, but they could take it easy until then.

The logjam would be a surprise. A mere two hundred feet upstream from where the rivers joined, a sharp bend hid a massive pileup against a small bridge. The river dropped several feet as it poured through a narrow aperture. There would not be time for a canoe to maneuver toward the bank. A canoe coming around that wooded bend would be pulled through.

It was a Friday, and that evening my best friend Page was spending the night. We were watching “The Howling” on TV and were especially gleeful since we knew Page’s parents wouldn’t approve. Mom and Dad sat a few feet away in their respective chairs. They were impervious to the playful noises of teens, having raised four children before me. Mom was reading a murder mystery and dad, a western. In the fiction we each absorbed that night, people were dying, but we had no presentiment of what had happened earlier that day.

The doorbell rang. A commercial was on, so I used the moment to expel my horror

movie-induced dithers. “I’ll get it,” and I bounced across the few feet of living room, acting clownish. Aroooo!

I opened the door and there he stood, in his dark uniform, hat in hand, bearing the worst possible news. This is the moment my breathing stilled and the TV screamed. The police officer glanced past me and asked for my dad. Whatever sixth sense parents have, without having heard a word, they were suddenly at my side. Mom’s book had dropped to the floor.

“Is this the Parks’ residence?”

“Yes.”

“Are you Robert Parks’ father?”

“Yes.”

“There’s been an accident.” An eternity stretched as he rotated his hat and shifted his foot. “This afternoon, your son Robert’s canoe overturned in the Rappahannock River. He went under and he didn’t resurface. They haven’t found him yet. Divers went in, but they ran out of daylight. They’ll resume searching in the morning.”

What biological mechanism allows for such a sudden change in perception and physiology? The room dimmed, objects acquired greater density, hearts slowed as if pumping mud. Our small house became a vessel in an alternate reality. In that instant, we were bereft. In that instant, we were not the same people.

We stood for a moment trying to assimilate the news and then mom sank onto the piano bench. Dad, a war veteran, mobilized. The only remedy for his panic was action. He gestured for the officer to come in. He reached my brother Bill on the phone, but then he couldn’t speak. He asked the officer to explain the situation. He called my sisters, Sharyn and Dianne, who were each a state or two away and finally cousin Jack to help immediately. I was sent to fetch my aunts and uncles who lived across the street.

Through running, I knew that I could somehow determine the outcome of my brother’s life or death. Page and I sprinted as if loosed out of the starting gate of a terrible race. My swiftness was a plea to any gods deigning to pay attention. My thoughts delirious, I glanced at the sky and yelled back to Page, “Look at the stars tonight. Aren’t they beautiful? He can’t be dead with stars like that.”

Bob studied the distanced pinpoints relentlessly, regardless of cold temperatures or an

early morning exam. With so much investment in the cosmos, I couldn't fathom how the stars might exist without him. If he was dead, then they should be too. We knew their names and the mythical origins of their names--Perseus, Orion, the Gemini. I looked up and appealed to these adventurers. I felt momentarily exuberant, as if I had been heard, but then Page and I were banging on doors. Porch lights came on. My relatives' shock filled me with dread. My connection to mythical beings was severed.

Urgency overcame my senses. We called Page's parents to come fetch her. I called Mrs. O'Donnell, my brother's mentor, his former, my current Latin teacher. She told me she'd light a candle for him and pray. I knew she'd pray in an ancient tongue. It was all we could think to do.

Early the next morning, men organized a search party and women gathered to oversee communications and food. My oldest brother, Bill and his wife, Sarah, had deposited half-dressed kids into the car and driven to Virginia from Pittsburgh. Upon arriving, Bill jumped into the truck dad had idling and they were at the river by dawn. I wanted to go. "No," they said.

Midmorning, dad called from a roadside market to tell us that the search was continuing. My sisters drove in, and being willful women, they had no qualms about taking me to the site. Sharyn, the eldest, kept saying that if the water was cold enough, if we could find Bob immersed, we might be able to resuscitate him. It was a false, but necessary hope. We hurried across a muddied field getting mired calf-deep, yanking our legs in anger and resentful of lost seconds. When we finally reached the bank, the divers were taking one last plunge. Nothing came of it. The current was strong and the water murky. They packed up their gear and we stood there, entreating. The firemen, policemen, and other rescue workers looked at us helplessly.

Someone in the family suggested that Bob could have hit his head, but still climbed out. He might be wandering in the woods with amnesia. Search parties were dispatched just in case. They would look for a few days. We looked longer.

We walked the riverbank daily hoping to find something. Crime novels had schooled me to look for marks in the mud where someone might have struggled out of the water. Broken branches might hold the telltale clue, a bit of torn cloth. At first, I walked with my brother Bill and a few family members, cousins mostly. Then friends and classmates

helped. There was one snowy day when we split into teams to cover each bank up and downstream. I was on the south bank following the current where the river pitched over large rocks. There was detritus from floods hanging in the trees. I grabbed the sundered leg of an aluminum chair and beat it against a trunk, dislodging the sand trapped inside. I kept beating long after it had emptied. Finally, it was just Joey and I looking as others returned to responsibilities and the needs of the living. We walked through a change in the season. We tripped over roots and climbed over boulders and bruised ourselves. Sometimes we talked about how Bob had rambled near these banks, his metal detector in hand, looking for Civil War bullets and buckles, or, if in a fanciful mood, gold. Mostly, we were silent. We forced ourselves to look for a shadowed mass in the water. We did not find him.

My family and I alternated between hope and despair. One of us always kept within earshot of the kitchen phone. When it rang, we didn't dare breathe. It was usually someone calling to check on us or to hear any news. There was no news. Waiting is exhausting work.

That unseasonably warm February 24th when the Karlsson boys had pulled into our driveway with the canoe and kayak strapped to the roof of their car, Bob had grabbed his pack and a sleeping bag and set off with a rascally grin. He had on jeans and a flannel shirt and my birthday present to him was strapped to his leg, a knife that would be handy at campsites. A bandana was tied around his head, fixing his glasses into place. I'd sat on the hill above the driveway watching them rearrange items in the car. I'd hoped they'd signal for me to jump in, but I wasn't the only one anxious to go. I had to hold onto our dog, Scotty, a ninety-five pound collie. He whined. Just as they were about to pull away, he broke free and lunged at the passenger door. We laughed at his anxiousness, but I can't help but wonder now, what did he know?

Tip had taken the first turn in the kayak and Bob and Joey had followed in the canoe. A few hours later, they rounded a wooded bend and confronted the immense logjam straining against a small bridge. Tip guided the kayak onto the bank, but the canoe couldn't maneuver. It went through the narrowed channel and flipped. Joey surfaced. He looked around as Tip looked on. They saw Bob for an instant, his head bloodied, and then

he was gone. One dove in to look for him. The other ran to the nearest farm for help.

The night before, Bob had been tickling me. “Did you read *The Metamorphoses* all the way through?” “Yes geez, yeeesss.” He was prepping me for the Virginia Junior Classical League Convention’s mythology test. Apollo and Daphne, Actaeon, Arachne, and Icarus. Easy peasy. A nymph escaped rape by becoming a laurel tree. As punishment for voyeurism, a man was turned into a stag and hunted. A mortal defeated a goddess in a weaving contest and she was turned into a spider. A prideful youth flew too close to the sun.

In the canoe, Bob had been sitting on his life jacket. I’ll never know why he tempted the Fates--Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos--but his life was now spun, measured, and cut. Ceyx drowned and his beloved Alcyone found his body on the shore. She beat her breasts in agony and tore her garments and the gods turned the couple into kingfishers.

Kingfishers and the drowned are inextricable in my mind.

We devised new ways of searching. Bill and Tip went to a psychic who worked with the police. They took Bob’s wallet and a map of the river. The psychic referred to Bob as dead, exhibiting a head wound, and in the company of two women. These women fit the description of my deceased grandmother and a comatose aunt. The psychic made three “X”s on the map. “His body is here,” she said. Divers were given instructions, but the weather fouled their attempts. By then, perhaps, his body had moved again, the river unwilling to relinquish him.

Three months after my brother disappeared we received the call. A park ranger had been walking along the bank after a heavy rain and she had found a body, or what was left of one, in a sand bar. It was being transported to the hospital. Could my dad come and identify it? Dad got a hold of Bill again and they went. When they returned, my dad held a knife in his outstretched hand. It posed a question. I nodded. The stone handle was unmistakable. It had still been strapped to his leg and it had kept vigil. Dental records were being sent to authenticate my brother’s identity, but we already had confirmation.

We had something to do now. Funeral arrangements. Mrs. O’Donnell would read Catullus.

My brother, Bob, died in the Rappahannock River near the small town of Remington,

Virginia. The Rappahannock is from the Algonquian word, *lappihanne*, meaning “river of quick, rising water.” At the time, it had been fed by a week of rain. Sixty-foot oaks had been undermined by flooding waters and pulled downstream. Animals had fallen in and drowned and their carcasses caught on snags. For years, farm machinery, old appliances, and cars had been dumped into deep holes. Barbed wire torn from fences tangled organic matter and iron into underwater encumbrances. One had jealously held my brother in its embrace.

I mused that Bob had metamorphosed into a water bird, perhaps a belted kingfisher. Every time I see a one, I wonder, maybe? Or, more likely, was he eaten by fish and lived through them now. Did birds swoop and eat the fish? Were particles of him absorbed by river plants? If the river is all of these things, did my brother now constitute the river? One day the cycle will be complete and he will return to the stars. Welcome company for him.

*The Potamoi are gods of rivers and streams in Greek Mythology.