

KENAN ORHAN

Soma

THROUGH THE HILLS sprout white turbines, lofted over fifty meters into the air. In the breeze they swing languid arms in arcs across the sky, dipping the tips of blades beneath the horizon and pulling them back up like the strokes of a swimmer. They are propellers anchored to the Earth, carrying it through its leisurely orbit. They are bright in the sun, these turbines, and at night their rotors glow by red safety lights, and we can't see the pillars or the blades, just the hubs sprinkling the air like cigarette butts.

And the miners walk in the release of the moon, heading with their meals in pails and plastic bags, heading with their hardhats heavy in their hands, heading to the shaft elevator that extends some two thousand meters underground where they will work in golden pockets of electric light while the sun begins its sweep across the sky. After six hours they will ride the elevator up, stopping shy of the surface to let their eyes adjust before they breach once more into the world above.

As a boy I woke with my father and watched him pack his breakfast of *sucuk* and boiled eggs, and struggled in his arms as he lifted me and kissed my cheek, stamping it black with coal dust carried always between the fibers of his mustache. Then my mother would wake and wipe my cheek clean and perform her own ablutions, and still hours before sunrise I would go to our apartment's balcony and wave goodbye to the miners. The moon so big and bright I waited all night for it to explode.

Still, I wake a little after four and go to the balcony with my coffee while my parents sleep. I wave to the miners as they walk through our village, and I make jokes: "Lock up your women. I'm on the prowl." They shout back: "Get a job, useless."

The file of men disappears behind the curve of the road, a scythe through the hills. For a half hour, at shift change, the town streets are empty and dark, the breeze shakes the homes of absent men, as if the village need only a little encouragement to leap up into the air and ride the wind far away.

Now those done with their shifts creep up the road quietly in a long column; the only sound is the shuffle of their feet. At the edge of the village

they break rank and slip over stone streets to their homes, to their beds. I wave at my friend Mesut, who comes to the base of my building wearing his smile like a shard of porcelain in the dirt. I finish my coffee, grab my bag, and hurry down to him. Through the slopes of our village, I follow him, asking about the soccer match, about his shift, about the movie I lent him. The sun on its way and I am restless.

We sneak out of the dawn and into his parents' apartment. The kitchen light displaces darkness, and from the hallway rolls his mother's snoring. Mesut goes to rinse the grit out of his hair so I sit at the table, take out my test-prep book, and start working on the mathematics practice problems. Unable to focus, I pick at the seams of the plastic table cover decorated in daisies, coming undone. Mesut's mother keeps in a small white vase on the table a purple orchid—plastic stem, paper petals. I tap my pencil on the book, I flip the pages back and forth. I watch the way the windows grow full of light.

Mesut shoves my book off the table, replacing it with a plate of pasta his mother cooks up each night. "Swallow a big gulp before saying a big word."

I pick the book back up and set it next to the pasta. Mesut's a year older than me. He dropped out of high school and has been working the mine for the last year.

"Win this race first, Izzet, then you can worry about entrance exams."

"I need both," I say. I tell him they don't give scholarships to idiots, no matter how fast they swim. My father can't afford university, not on his pension. I'm jittering my leg like I do every morning, expectant of the water. Everyone around me moves in smooth, simple motions, their muscles spent from hours underground.

Mesut sits next to me. His father has already left for the mine. From the bedroom, tremble snores growing louder, a testament to sound slumber. Mesut used to work the night shift with his father, but when one night someone ran off with a neighbor's bicycle, Mesut's mother cried worries of thieves and rapists. Now Mesut's father works by day to spend his evenings at home with his wife. Mesut tells me all their time together strains their marriage.

Mesut crumbles feta cheese over my pasta and gets a plate for himself, and this is what we do each morning: fork cold pasta into our mouths like furnaces.

Mesut's mother sleepwalks through the kitchen and into the TV room. She watches the local weather reports until after we leave, until she wakes

up, then she cleans away the dishes, the evidence of us, and goes to cook more pasta.

I clean my first plate and pile up another. We finish our meal in the silence of smacking lips and digestion, then I fill a plastic container with another helping, and go change into my swimsuit, and pack my book back into my grocery bag with my goggles and towel, and I follow Mesut to the shed out back. The sun is up and already heavy in the sky so that it droops, long like an oval.

We climb into his dad's car, a relic from the sixties, and Mesut drives us out of the terraced village on narrow roads I imagine calculating the slopes of with my graphing calculator beneath the great expanse of mountain-fringed sky.

"Take the 240," I say.

"At this hour it will be slow."

For the last two months we've said this each morning, and I enjoy Mesut's route through Darkale, the winding descent. The way we travel is a delay of the sun, a delay of my eager nerves, my return to easy strokes. We take roads that cleave the mountains, roads from which we can count all the tumbledown shacks and hovels of the province falling over slowly, roads covered in shade, roads with streetlamps still on though the sky is lightly blue. Retaining walls squeeze our path, and we skirt around rocks fallen into the road and piles of trash people leave but no one picks up. And then before us opens the mountain range for just a moment, revealing Soma like a secret, tucked into the crevices, atop flat peaks, surrounded by gravel summits, potholed roads, telephone wires, and trees of pitch that dance in the breeze. Far away are rain clouds. Half-finished houses in gradients, their terra-cotta roofs like steps into the air. TV dishes pimple up along the skyline. The minarets are ablaze with muezzins. The streets are built overtop a number of buildings, all are curved like funnels flowing down the slopes through paths of least resistance. At a stoplight a man shoves bottles of water through my open window. Mesut runs the light.

"You could have ripped off his arm," I say.

"He's got two."

We turn east and head toward the thermal power plant. We curve around the field where squat cooling towers pop up in neat rows of six—olive trees growing in the shade of their steam clouds. Smoke drifts from the three slender chimney stacks attached to the plant like beautiful cigarettes. The plant fires the poor ignite dug out from the mine by Mesut and his father and every other able-bodied man in our village.

The furnaces produce kilos of bottom ash every minute. The ash is mixed with water in a pump and sluiced away from the plant in eleven oversized irrigation pipes. We turn at the end of the olive grove and follow the pipes north out of the factory grounds. To our left are the eleven outgoing pipes, to our right are seven incoming pipes. Beyond these are the vineyards and groves and power lines and rusted-out cars and derelict houses, and farther still are the shops and restaurants and apartments and mosques of Soma, where no one is yet on the street—all still ambling through their dreams. I practice my breathing exercises.

Mesut slows—ahead there is a dog with valleys in the space between its ribs, with gray hair around its snout, with shoulders sliding up and down like oil derricks as it crosses our path. A car behind us honks, reminding Mesut we aren't alone, and he gooses it so we speed down the track of road that runs away from the plant in a beautiful line, the kind of line in my textbooks, the desire line, the most efficient line you ever saw, and I swear I can hear the water coursing through the pipes.

These pipes empty into a man-made dam to the north of town. Its bottom is covered in cement to keep toxins from leaking into water supplies. The ash separates from the water and settles along the cement like multicolored oils in chemistry. The empty water is filtered from the top and pumped back to the plant. We park at the road that runs along the side of the reservoir. Because of the ash and cement, the water is bright, turquoise, as beautiful as the Ottoman palaces of Istanbul, covered in electric-blue arabesques.

A wall separates spare water from the filtration area where the slurry settles. I stretch, shaking my limbs to get the blood flowing. Mesut sets up a lawn chair in the gravel and begins drinking. I dive into the cold water. I backstroke toward the middle of the pond, keeping my eyes on clouds slicing the blue same as me.

“Keep your eyes closed, Izzet.”

I close them. Open-water swimming depends on bearings, straight lines, knowing your way without looking. Mesut shouts when I begin to drift and says nothing when my vector is straight for the telephone pole on the opposite bank.

Other days I have practiced taking off while treading because Mesut says they might not provide a diving platform. He wouldn't know, but it is good practice.

Before that, I practiced turns. He had me swim around buoys he set up while he watched my strokes underwater.

Before that I practiced swimming in groups. It's hard to navigate a race with hundreds of people cutting through the same small stretch of water. We'd made planks with short rudders and rope tails. Mesut rigged them all up into a network. I positioned myself amid the wooden swimmer-substitutes, and swam toward Mesut while he pulled the flock of planks along, keeping pace with me.

Now there is only sighting left to work on. I keep conditioning, but I'm in good shape for the race. Mesut drinks his beers and falls asleep while I incorporate sighting into the rhythm of my strokes. When Mesut wakes, he takes notes on my timing, my pace.

There is no jitter in my mind, my nerves are cooled by the water. Mesut shouts to me, his voice crashing with the crest of the water in my ear. I can't hear what he says. I reach the dividing wall and push back from it. I backstroke for the beach, for the car. In the middle of the reservoir I look directly up, the blue of the sky converging with the blue of the water in my peripheries so that I am a point in an ineffable expanse of buoyancy. Here I have no thoughts. My limbs negotiate with the weight of the water through which I become weightless. I am deprived of sensation save for the color of the sky. I am miles in the air. My heart steadies. My strokes slow. The beach is close though I can't feel it.

We pack everything into the car. My muscle cords twitch and scream beneath my skin. Mesut takes the 240 back to town because he knows I like to watch the turbines while I cool down, because I like to watch the great many turn. We don't park, but he drives slowly. There's not enough of a breeze today; the turbines hang in disuse over the clefts of hills and fields.

"I'm going to be up there," I say.

Mesut gives a tired laugh. He's been awake, he's been working, he's been drinking.

"Right there," I point. "I'm going to straddle the rotors."

"What's the difference, eh?"

Instead of descending into the dark, I will climb into the bright day, into the sunlight.

"The same thing is done up there," Mesut says, "the gathering of electricity. So you are in the air, or in the ocean, or underground, whatever. I want to be flatly on the ground. Safe. I wouldn't mind taking in a little sun across a bed of grass, or under olive trees."

He drops me off at my house, then he's off to bed. There are friends of his who go straight to bed after work, and most of the year they never see the sunlight.

At home, my parents watch television. In the kitchen, I study some more. My mom comes in. She cuts up a watermelon and leaves a plate of slices next to me. She sits across from me, watching the flicks of my pencil.

“I’m so proud of you, you know,” she says.

What do I say to that? I could tell her it’s not a sure thing. I could tell her I haven’t even taken the exams, I haven’t even swum the race, but what are these things to her? She looks at me, marble eyes heavy with pride.

“Is that watermelon for everyone?” my dad asks.

She takes it out to the living room, and they call for me to join them. On screen is an American show. The cigarettes and cans of beer are blurred out so every few seconds the characters take swigs from pixelated rectangles.

“Have they asked you what you want to study?” my mom asks.

“I haven’t turned in my application yet.”

“You ought to get into architecture,” she says.

“He’s going to be like his father,” my dad says, rosy glints of melon pooling in the corners of his mouth. He does this more and more, says I’m going to be a replica of him—like I haven’t been training, like I haven’t been studying, like the turbines are the same as the mine.

“I will be an engineer,” I say.

“Do they work inside?” my mom asks.

“Four years of school just so you can wear a bigger hardhat? If you’re going to fantasize don’t do it on a budget,” my dad says as he stuffs another slice of watermelon in his mouth.

They eat watermelon and laugh at the television. My mom goes to the kitchen to start tea. Without looking from the television screen, my dad says: “What’s that worth?”

He means *What can I do with it?* He means *How far will that take me from the mine?* He means he wants the distance in kilometers that I will escape into.

“I could be a technician for those windmills,” I say. “Mom would like having me around as you two grow old.”

“Who’s planning on growing old?” My dad laughs a little. “Who wants to keep you here?”

“They make a living. It isn’t the mine.”

We sit like that until my mom brings out the copper tray of tulip glasses. We stir in cubes of sugar, the tinkle of teaspoons tickling our silence. The television is turned way down. My mom falls asleep. The engineers make six times what I would make in the mine. They live twice as long, I hear.

They have suntans.

“It isn’t the mine,” my dad says, trying the words out for himself.

“There’s a program that I could do. It specializes in . . .” But I don’t know what to say. It’s too late, and I can see that. My dad doesn’t care about the windmills. We sit close to each other on the couch, the rough fabric scratching our undersides like bark. I’m jittering my leg. I’m feeling my body sink into the cushion. I want my dad to ask me about my swimming, how training’s going, what Mesut thinks of my speed.

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about,” he whispers. “It is the mine.”

There are cookies and a bowl of nuts on the tray. I swallow the tea as easy as sand, and my throat feels swollen. My dad keeps eating, plucking almonds from the bowl with sticky-glazed fingers from the watermelon. I think about going for a walk to get out of the house, but there’s nothing to see in this town except retired men huddled around small tables at street corners, playing cards and *tavla*, drinking tea and coffee, their skin drooping like time because of their underground lives. There’s nothing to see in this town but quiet women, running errands, beating dust from rugs, clipping cotton sheets to clotheslines, dripping soot from their hair at the bounce of each step. There’s nothing to see in this town but coal-stained children like feral dogs through the streets, their lungs sucking all the ash from the air.

I go to my room instead. I try reading but I don’t like the book and I’m a slow reader. Everyone I know is asleep or in the mine, like I’m a fugitive, like I’m the only unclipped bird in an aviary. I go to bed as well, with the sun in my window. When I wake, the sky is dark, the clouds cover the moon. I take my coffee on the balcony and shout to the miners until Mesut returns and drives me to the reservoir. We do this for two more weeks. I study when I’m not training, though I am exhausted and unable to focus. I think of every face in town. I book a small room at a hostel near the Dardanelles. Mesut gets the day off so that he can drive me to the race. The website claims over 600 registered entrants.

The morning of the race is here, and splitting across the sky comes a crash you can hear in your bones. It’s flat, monosyllabic. The ground doesn’t falter, the air is clear and blue, the grass shudders only in the breeze. If you could listen to the scrape of tectonic plates, if for just a flash of time there was the great flow of mantle and crust caught in your ear, it wouldn’t sound like this. It’s not at all like an earthquake. We know those here; you grow up knowing them. We know this too: the silence, the absence

of aftershocks, the snap of energy is a single, released moment, the space between heartbeats. It can suffocate you if you're not careful—the mine.

I've never seen the streets so full as they are now, though no one hurries. They compact themselves into each other, press close, hunch. More people from more homes. I break from my mom's grasp and run down to the street, her shouts chasing after me. Still, we all pack tighter, our closeness brushing black dust from our skin. The crowd shuffles now, searching with stamping feet for the path to the mine. People talk in hushed voices, careful that their words are not picked up by the wind. The mine, everyone whispers, the mine. No one runs, no one shoves, no one steps on toes or heels. We walk deliberately down the curved path to the mine, our voices extinguishing as we near the mouth of the shaft. For a long time, long enough that clouds have moved to cover us, we stand there watching from afar a dozen or so men scraping at the pile of earth obstructing the main shaft—scraping with their hardhats like shovels.

I see Mesut come away from the mouth of the mine and run to him. His face is black and he doesn't recognize me. Behind me people start running for things, for shovels, for carts, for oxygen tanks, for picks, for stretchers, for a defibrillator, but we don't know what we're doing, we don't know what's going on.

Exasperated, Mesut shouts for help, shouts that the slope to the mine is blocked by boulders and soil. I follow him back down the ramp to the shaft elevator, my arms swinging wildly as I try to keep up. In his pocket must be the keys to his dad's car. People swarm around us, with buckets, with handcarts, with helmets, with outstretched shirts in vise-fingers. Others shovel rubble and dirt into every cart, every helmet, every palm to be carried away, up the tracks and into the sun. Everyone is shouting, cutting at the great barrier of earth between us and the shaft elevator with frenzied limbs. A scream of sirens, and the crowd breaks for a line of ambulances and the police chief's car. Mesut is throwing boulders large as my torso into carts, up and down, up and down, like a piston. I'm bobbing my head up and down beside him, screaming that there's no time to waste, there's no time for digging. There's a race up the coast, there's a race we must get to.

"Grab a shovel," he says between grunts, between heaves.

"Can I take the car?" I ask, because what else am I going to do? It's all set, it's my life at stake too.

He doesn't hear me. He shoves his fingers into the soil and unearths rock after rock like potatoes plucked for boiling.

"Are the keys with you?"

Mesut looks at me, confused. He keeps digging with his hands. He doesn't say anything. He scratches at the black soil with calloused fingertips. He's bleeding from a few cuts on his arms, between his fingers. There are hundreds of people now, a number of trucks with emergency lights, a bulldozer, an excavator, a dump truck. More people come from the path, some with pots to help scoop dirt. No one's crying yet. I notice it, that no one's crying yet.

"Can I take the car?"

Mesut throws a stone back into the rubble. Screaming, he grabs me by the shoulders and shoves me into the pile. He yells to get a fucking shovel, to start digging. With difficulty I pull myself up from the rubble and rocks, a stray point knocking me in the spine, and then there is Mesut's fist, fast and fleshy, striking me squarely in the jaw. I can't see for a moment in my right eye, the way the sight goes when I am swimming too long underwater. There's a pounding moving from the exploded capillaries of my face through my jaw and temples to my ears. Mesut is on top of me as my sight comes back, his dirt-caked face shouting at me through the fizzling little dots on my peripheries. I grab at his collar, I try pulling him to the side, but he's bigger than me, pushing my chest into the dirt, shoving my head back so that I can feel the soil spill down my forehead. Desperate, I kick him off; no one around us seems to care. They are all singularly busy in their efforts to remove the rubble.

With ease, Mesut drags me off the pile and onto the cart tracks. He throws the keys to his dad's car at me and goes back to ripping at the rocks with his fingers. All around people are tearing into the mine. But I'm already packed, I'm already enrolled. I go to the car and drive away, north through the stalks of windmills. I listen the whole way for another explosion. I leave the radio off, and for the four-hour drive I listen carefully for another explosion, promising myself that if it gets worse I will turn back, but the four hours don't take long, not really, and I'm in Çanakkale, with a view of the Dardanelles from a square window in the hostel. There's an Australian named Bruce in the bunk next to me who asks me if I'm excited for the race tomorrow, who asks me if I got that bruise on my face from swimming.

I don't say anything, not to him or anyone else while I lie in my bed until morning, thinking about the route I must take to cross the channel, thinking about the landmarks I will use for bearings, timing out my breathing with imaginary strokes. In the morning, I have a small breakfast very early and ride the ferry to the other side of the Dardanelles. I sign

in and look around the beach for a good spot to start from. The water is choppy. It will be difficult to navigate. Where the strait begins to narrow, near Çanakkale, it is only a kilometer and a half wide. The current there is inexorable. I set up at the north end of the beach, as far as I can, an extra two or three hundred meters up from most of the other swimmers, all in their Speedos and caps and goggles, lubing themselves with Vaseline, slapping their muscles and shaking their limbs. I've done my preparations in the hostel. I don't like this bit of showmanship beforehand. The novices take places as far south as they can squeeze, as close to the first marker as possible, without room to maneuver with the current. The man next to me is very old for this race; beside him is a woman a few years older. They are married and from Liverpool. I ask what it is they are putting in their mouths. Salt tablets, they say, they are good for preventing cramps. They give me some. I take them with water and start up with my little ritual of splashing water from the sea on my forearms, shins, thighs, chest.

There's a starter's pistol, but we don't hear it this far away, in this much wind. We take the cue of the hundreds of bodies diving into the water, cutting at it with frenzied limbs, violent lungs, combustion engines inside thoracic cavities. I dive in and aim directly across, aim straight for Asia though the finish line is a few kilometers down, past Çanakkale. It takes some time to escape the breakers, and I haven't paced myself well, but soon enough I am out, striding through the open water, I am beyond the sounds of shore, I am above a blur, a void, an ineffable divide. When I take a breath, I adjust my line. While I stroke, I gaze below me, watching the bottom until it dissolves behind the opacity of depth. But it is an illusion, the bottom is only a hundred meters at its greatest. There are men trapped now in a tunnel over two thousand meters underground, and their lungs must be deflated balloons.

Most of the swimmers, especially those that started farthest south, are taken by the current of the water emptying into the Aegean. They broke too late, their lines too direct. They will not make it across. I make my turn and let the water carry me. In a long sweep I've aimed for the beach like a celestial body exiting orbit. There are a number of other racers who have done the same as me, there are a good number of them. But I am fast, I am calm, and I scrape at the crest of the water, I grip and tear and cut through it. Past the narrow I don't bother looking around me, I don't worry for nearby kicks or slaps. I don't bother opening my eyes beneath the waves. I look only during breaths, I look only at the expanse of blue above, beside—I think only of my breaths, conscious, measured like the

breaths of men who must worry over the factor of oxygen. I am not any distance above or below; my elevation is zero. I am on the flat of the earth. As I turn my head, my ear catches the gust of the wind. Every few strokes, there is the boom against my eardrum from the breeze. I listen below me, I listen for explosions in the earth but can't hear anything over the slap and kick of a thousand hands and feet.

I ride the breakers to shore. A man takes a picture from the beach as I slip through the glinting surf. I can taste the salt in my smile. My back is burned from the sun and the iodine. There are others in the water, the other swimmers. I am the only one on land, and my body feels heavy, the fibers of my muscles drip from my skeleton under the pressure of gravity.

Before my feet have a chance to caked with sand, a committee brings me a ribbon and a bottle of liquor. I ask for water and let someone drive me back to my room in Çanakkale, where I pack my things and send a text to my mother telling her I'll be back after dinner.

But when I get back no one will ask me about what I've done here, what it means for me. Will they think me vile? When I pull the car back into Mesut's shed, I check his house but no one is home. It's evening, the sun is an orange radiance spread just below the mountaintops. I walk through an empty village, my hand out, reaching for the sides of houses, brushing them with fingertips until I'm outside my own home. I walk up to my room. No one is here. Lights are not coming on in the other houses. I fall asleep and don't wake up until a truck honks in the street the next morning.

A procession of black cars curves around the truck, on their way to the square not far from Mesut's house. I splash my face and look for my parents. They are out somewhere. Maybe at the mine. Outside, I follow a small group of people walking after the procession of cars. I ask them if they have any news. If there's anyone still underground.

"They aren't sure if anyone's still alive. Already they've hauled fifty bodies."

"How are they breathing? How are they breathing that deep?" I ask.

A machine is still pumping air down the shaft like a large snorkel, the miners who are dead or alive are struggling to sip from it. They are stuck, trapped, some with bodies broken in a dozen places, they tell me. They've pulled a few survivors from the mine, in a trickle are the miners surfacing.

"Is it a funeral?" I ask about the cars.

President Erdoğan is visiting. He's speaking in front of the old bey's mansion. In the square so usually stuffed with *döner* vendors and coffee

drinkers, are all the people I have ever seen in my life, every face to haunt the little village. More than that, even, more faces, more people from other villages, from the city of Soma, not far away. They're hoisting banners, picket signs. They shout while the mayor introduces the president. He's taller than you think, with eyes like coal. He tells us that mining accidents are typical, they are to be expected. He tells us of incidents in Britain and France in the nineteenth century, talking to us like we are anachronistic, like we are suspended in the past. Since the mine was privatized, the cost of producing one ton of coal has dropped over eighty percent. Our mines kill us at rates five times greater than in China, three hundred and sixty times greater than in America.

Looking around, I am wrong. This is not everyone I have ever seen. This is only the semblance of the village. This is only the people not part of the mine. The people chant: Murderer Erdoğan. All around are men, some wearing suits, some in construction uniforms, some in miner's coveralls, some in firemen gear, some with hardhats on, some with shovels over their heads. The women are in their living rooms, at the funeral homes, in morgues identifying bodies they barely recognize.

The president steps off the platform and immediately his bodyguards wrap around him. His limousine is blocked by the crowd, so the guards escort him to the lobby of a bank at the corner while rocks fly through the air. I pick up a rock as well and think about throwing it, but I don't deserve to, I don't belong here with a rock to throw at a car. The rocks these men throw are dug from the mine, from atop the bodies of their friends. A guard fires his rifle into the air. The crowd parts for the limousine, though their chants grow louder. The president is ushered into his car and driven away. A man tears from the crowd and runs for the car.

It's Mesut. He kicks the wheel of it. He kicks the fender, and right away two bodyguards in fatigues with rifles at their shoulders grab him and throw him into the pavement of the street. The motorcade takes off, cutting through the crowd of mourners, protesters, locals. They throw rocks at the bodyguards. The two men in fatigues try to wrangle Mesut's arms. A presidential aide in a suit pulls one of the bodyguards away. Fire in his mouth, he swings a sharp foot into the side of Mesut on the pavement. He swings again, he swings a third time, kicks Mesut in the ribs while the two bodyguards in fatigues hold him to the cold pavement. They will arrest Mesut, and hold him for weeks, maybe months, without charging him. His father, if he is not in the mine, will not find work. His mother will spend mornings in the prison visiting him until she is

detained as well. I do nothing. I don't stand out from the crowd. I've just won the race, I will pass my entrance exams. I go from the street full of people down an alley, and I walk for a long way through a village I don't recognize, until I'm not far from the cemetery they've been taking the coffins to in truckloads.

Along the low stone wall stand relatives in long lines. A few politicians have stuck around, maybe they're from nearby, maybe they're up for re-election. The coffins are all covered with the flag, like they were soldiers, like they've just come back from the east, shot to bits.

They've brought in digging machines, three of them. The undertaker and his two sons can't keep up. They cut little rectangles into the dirt, long rows of them, you can't count how many, you wouldn't need to, the number will be on headlines. The space between the graves is slight, out of necessity.

I think of the speed sound travels through water. There's a difference between saltwater and freshwater. There's a difference between loamy soil and geode. Supposedly sound travels fastest through solid objects, but that can't be true. When I press my ear to the earth I still hear the whisper of methane, the crack of each molecule combusting, the slow fizzle. I can still hear the explosion in process.

Am I so different? Am I not just the other side of the coin, the man who will climb up a shaft two hundred meters above the ground and tinker with machinery so far from the surface, tinker with the things of power, of energy? I will tell my children stories of my work the way my father has. I will tell them of the world of light, the world without gravity.

My father's mustache still leaks black powder, but mine will not. My children will ask me about the mine, will crawl onto my lap and ask why the fathers of all their friends have mustaches of pitch, have backs like mountain ranges, have stories they share, they know by heart, they lived through side by side. I will tell them of my life in the sky and they will ask me about the men I left in the earth. Perhaps they will ask me of the mine when they've outgrown sitting on my lap, ask me why the men of Soma walk like phantoms of soot through the dawn, and I will tell them of my love for the slow swing of turbines. Perhaps they will ask me about the mine when they've just come back from it, hands caked, cracks of white on their faces, ask me why I'm not down there with them, why I'm still climbing ladders upward bound. Perhaps they will ask me what I did during the explosion, and I will tell them about the race, about the beautiful strokes of windmills.