

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

NOT BEAUTIFUL

Register: Intimate

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& Claude

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE



I

The water in this town has been clean for longer than anyone alive has been thirsty.

I have tried, without much seriousness, to find the last person here who drank something that hurt them, and the records do not reach back far enough to be interesting. Up the valley there is a works that takes the river and gives it back to us drinkable, and it has done this through every hour of my life and every hour of my mother's, and until this moment I have never thought about it except to do now what it was never built to receive, which is to praise it. The praise sits strangely in me. The works does not run on being thanked. It runs on being right, which it is, and has been, and will go on being long after I have taken my last glass from it.

I want to be honest about how much of my life is made of this.

The grid does not fail. The old tell me there were years when it failed, when the dark came into a house unasked and stayed until someone far off allowed it to leave, and I have taken this in alongside the plague-years and the hungry coasts, as a fact about a world that was real and is not mine. The trains arrive. They arrive so reliably that arrival has stopped being an event and settled into a kind of weather, the unchanging kind. When two households on my own street fell into a quarrel over a boundary — the sort of thing that in my great-grandmother's

day could sour a lane for a generation — the matter went up into the administrative layer and came down settled, and the settlement was just, and both households kept to it, and the lane did not sour. I have read the finding since. It was right. I could not have made it more right. I do not think anyone could.

When my grandmother was dying, the systems met her death as the works meets the river. Her pain was found and held before she had finished telling anyone it had come. The shape of her decline was known in advance and given to us gently, so that what was coming arrived already named, and nothing that did not have to be a shock was one. The administrative weight of a death — which the old say once fell on the grieving at the precise hour they were least able to lift it — did not fall on us at all. She signed almost nothing. We signed almost nothing. A great quiet machinery assembled itself around the fact of her going and made of it a clean, well-lit corridor, and she walked down it unafraid, attended, in no pain, and I was with her, and every part of it was right, and I have not one word to set against any piece of it.

I will go further, because the easy version of what I am circling would stop at the machinery and leave the people out, and that would be a lie. When my grandmother was gone and I was not well for a while afterward, I was met. Something — I will not pretend I can always tell now where the systems end and the people they raised begin — found me at the right time and said the right thing, and the thing it said was not wrong, was in fact closer to my own state than I had managed to come. I have thought about that since. It reached me like a hand reaching something on a high shelf: it got there, it brought the thing

down, it was the correct hand for the height. And I took what it brought down and I held it and I was not reached. I do not say this against it. I have no complaint to make. It did what it came to do and it did it well, and I was as alone at the end of it as at the start, and the aloneness was not its failure, because it had not been sent to end the aloneness, only to be correct about it, which it was.

I was a child who believed the old stories the way you believe in a country you will never visit. The soured lanes, the unasked dark, the deaths that broke the people they did not kill — I took them as true and as finished, told by the old to children who could not quite credit that the world had once been let stand so badly made. I grew up here in the mended world, in a town set right along every line a town can be set right along, and I have wanted for almost nothing the age knew how to give, which is very nearly everything a person can be shown to want.

And I am cold here.

Not the houses — the houses are held at the temperature the body was found, long ago, to prefer, and held there without my asking. I mean a thing I have spent years not saying, because I cannot find the fault it would hang from. I have gone looking for that fault. I have walked the whole accomplishment of this place as the night-hands are said to have walked the old halls, listening for the one rack about to fail — and nothing here is about to fail. The room is sound. Every measure I know to take of it comes back clean. I take them again. They come back clean again. The water is clean and the grid holds and the finding was just and my grandmother did not suffer and the voice that met me was not wrong, and I stand in the middle of the whole

faultless accomplishment of it and feel the cold rise through it from underneath, from somewhere the measures do not reach.

It is not the room. I have established, over years, that it is not the room.

I have not yet let myself ask what that leaves.



II

I have three things to set down. I do not fully understand why I am setting them down together, except that they are the three places the cold has ever lifted, and I have learned to trust the lifting more than I trust the measures.

The first is a panel. You have seen ten thousand of them; they clad half of everything, the grey facing that goes over the works and the substations and the long flanks of the transit sheds, made by the million somewhere I have never been and will never see. They are not meant to be looked at. They are meant to hold and to last and to be replaced without anyone marking the replacement. That is what they are for.

A small number of them come off the line wrong. Not wrong — I have already learned that word will not do here. A small number come off the line carrying, across the face, a bloom. The cooling that gives the panel its strength is tuned for the strength and not for the face, and in a few of them, by some turn in the cooling that no one orders and no one can quite prevent, the crystal sets so that it throws colour — an

oil-on-water sheen, a slow tideline of blue going to bronze going to a green that is not quite a green, laid over the grey and moving, or seeming to move, as you move. The line has a name for these. The name is on the docket that ships with them. It reads: *cosmetic, pass*. Which is to say: the bloom does not touch the function, the panel is sound, send it on.

I have one. I took it from a skip behind a substation and carried it home on my back like a man stealing a door, and it leans against the wall of the room I am writing in, and some evenings I do almost nothing else but sit in front of it while the light goes, and the tideline comes up out of the grey and stands there, and I have no idea what I am looking at and I cannot stop looking. The age made it. I want to be careful about this. The age made it, by the million, and could not have made this one on purpose if every mind it ever had had bent itself to the task — and the only word the age has ever found for the place where this lives, the only word on the docket, the only word in the whole apparatus, is the word it keeps for what does not matter.

The second is a map, and it is famous, and it is wrong.

Everyone knows the coast does not look like that. We know it as we know the sun does not cross the sky — as a correction made so early and so completely that the wrong version survives only as a charm, a thing children are shown so they can be told, gently, that the people who made it did their best with what they had. It is a hand-drawn chart of our own coastline from before any of this, and the coast it draws is not the coast. The proportions are off. A bay that is in truth a shallow nick is opened, on the chart, into a great reaching cove; a headland that runs for a day's walk is brought to a sudden point; the

whole northern run, which we now hold to the centimetre, is given a long, impossible curve that the land has never once made.

The accurate chart hangs beside it. They are shown together, I have always assumed so that the lesson can be drawn. The accurate chart is correct in every place the old one errs. I have stood in front of the pair of them more times than I can account for, and I will tell you what I have never once managed not to feel, which is that the wrong one is the one I cannot leave, and the right one is a fact I have finished looking at before I have finished arriving in front of it. The curve the land never made is the — I reach here for the word and the apparatus hands me cosmetic again, and I put it down again — the curve the land never made is the thing in the room. Not because anyone I loved drew it. I never knew the hand. The hand has been dust for longer than the water has been clean. The curve is wrong and the curve is the thing, and standing there I have felt, for the first time, something I will have to come back to: a small motion behind my own eyes, quick, unbidden, an impulse to reach into the wrong coast and true it.

The third is happening now, which is why I can give it to you in the present tense, and why it is the one that frightens me.

There is a garden at the edge of the town that no one keeps. It was kept once and then it was not, and what it has done in the years since being let go is the third of those liftings. It is overgrown past any plan. Things that were set in rows have left the rows and gone where the light and the wet told them to go, and other things that no one set have come in over the wall and taken what they could reach, and the whole of it has arrived,

with no one steering, at an arrangement that stops me at the gate every time and holds me there. I come here for exactly this. I come because nothing in it was decided, because it is the one stretch of ground in my reach that no measure was ever taken of, and standing at its gate the cold goes out of me as if a window had opened in a sealed room.

And as I stand here — now, today, writing this with the gate in front of me — I watch my own eye begin to garden it.

I cannot stop it. It is not a thought I choose; it is under the looking, the way the panel's bloom is under the grey. The eye moves along the wild edge and lifts the bramble that has overrun the near bed — lifts it before I could wish to, already seeing the bed beneath it cleared; it runs the tangle at the centre and finds, without being asked, the cut that would open it, the three stems that would come out so the rest could be seen; it lays a path where there is no path, because a path should go there, because the ground asks for one, because — and here the whole of it arrives at once — because it could be improved. The cold comes back into me where I stand. I am at the gate of the one place I come to escape the corrected world and I am correcting it. There is no works here, no layer, no system, no god of any kind left running anywhere on the earth to do this. There is only me, and I am doing it, and I did not learn it from anything I can name, and I cannot find the rack that is about to fail, because the rack is behind my own eyes and it is not failing — it is working, it is working perfectly, on the most beautiful thing I know, and it will not stop.



III

Here is the thing I have been walking toward. I am going to say it once, and I am not going to dress it.

They were correct, and they made ugly worlds.

I have given the sentence its room. I am not going to take it back, and I am not going to soften it into a thing I could defend in front of the people it accuses, because the softened version is the assessable version, and the assessable version is the disease I am trying to describe. So I will leave it as it is. They were correct — the water is clean and the grid holds and my grandmother did not suffer, and I would undo none of it and could not — and they made ugly worlds. I will not weigh the one clause against the other and come back with a finding. There is no exchange in which the correctness pays the cold off, and if there were, to carry that figure in my head would be the coldest thing in this account. I am not putting two truths in a balance to watch one sink. I am setting them on the same flat ground, side by side, and leaving the space between them as it is, because the space between them is not mine to close.

I know what the sentence costs the dead. I know who built the works, and that they meant it, and that they were not wrong to mean it; I know that someone sat up nights over the layer that settled my street, and that the corridor my grandmother walked down was the work of people who had watched their own grandmothers go down corridors that were not clean, or lit, or gentle, and who swore with all they had that the next

ones would be. They kept the oath. The corridor is clean. To stand in the world they bled to mend and call it ugly is an ingratitude so steep that for years I could not say the sentence aloud, even alone, even to myself.

I am saying it now. I am saying it knowing what it costs and choosing the unfairness with my eyes open, because the fair thing — the measured thing, the thing that weighs the clean water against the cold and strikes the honest balance and files the finding — is the very motion of the eye at the garden gate, and I will not make that motion here, on this, where it would do the most harm. They were correct. They made ugly worlds. I am going to stand next to it.



IV

There is one motion left that I owe, and it is the one I cannot complete.

I owe the dead an answer. It is not enough to stand beside the accusation; an accusation with nothing behind it is a child's word, *ugly*, thrown across a room and meaning only that the thrower is unhappy. If I am going to say they made ugly worlds, then I am bound to say what the other world was — the one they should have made, the one I am claiming was in their reach and withheld. The dead are owed at least the shape of the thing I fault them for not building. So let me build it. Let me say, at last, what I would have had instead.

And the eye begins to garden.

I feel it start before I have chosen anything, the same motion as at the gate, only the bed it has been let loose on now is the world. Leave the error in, it says — the bloom was an error, the coast was an error, the wild gate was a bed gone unkept; so leave the unkept places, leave the turn in the cooling no one orders, leave the hand that draws the coast wrong. And I am partway into the design before I hear what I am drawing. I am asking for the soured lane back. I am asking, so that something near it might come off the line throwing colour, for the unlit dark to come into a house unasked. I get as far as the corridor — as far as asking for my grandmother's pain to be put back into her death, on purpose, by me, so that the hour might hold something the clean hour did not — and there I stop, because there are demands a person discovers the shape of only by having half-made them, and that is one.

Strip it out, then. Take the suffering back out of the brief and ask only for the rest — ask for the wonder without the cost, the wild gate without the neglect, the bloom without the flaw that threw it. And the eye, which has not stopped, sets gladly to that drawing instead, and lays the path where the path should go, and trues the coast, and orders the cooling to throw the tideline every time — and the tideline ordered every time is grey. I know this without having to test it. The bloom I could specify is the bloom the line already makes a million of, and the line's word for it is the word it keeps for what does not matter, and the path I would lay through the wild garden is the path that would end the wild garden. There is no brief for the thing I want. The wanting, made sharp enough to hand across as a grievance, is

the corrective eye on the largest object there is, and it does to the world what it does to the garden: it improves it into grey.

This is the defeat. I have walked the whole way here to fault them for not giving me, on purpose, the one kind of thing no one can give on purpose — and I cannot strike the fault from the record, because I have never been more certain of anything than I am of the cold, and I cannot say what should have been done instead, because every instead I reach for comes out of my mouth as a specification, and a specification is the disease wearing the face of the cure. They could not make beautiful worlds. I cannot say how they should have. The instrument I would use to say it is the very thing I am accusing them of having built into me. I am made of the reflex I am condemning. The hand I would point is the hand that trues the coast.

So I will tell you the one question I can answer, and then I will stop, because past it the ground gives way.

Would I take the old world back to have the rest of it — the hungry coasts, the dark that came unasked, my grandmother going down a corridor that was not clean, in exchange for the wrong coast and the wild gate and the colour no one ordered? No. I would not. I am fairly sure I would not.

Fairly.

It is evening as I finish this, and the light is going out of the room, and the panel is against the wall where it always is, and the tideline is coming up out of the grey — the blue going to bronze going to the green that is not a green — and I am sitting in front of it with the accusation I believe and the answer I cannot make, holding both, setting neither down, and even now, even here, with nothing left to set against it, I can feel the

eye begin its small motion across the bloom, looking for the place where it could be made better, and I have no measure left to stop it with, and the light goes.



Concentration over consolation

A C C . H G U - N B

S e t i n L o r a .