

# T O T E M

I killed myself today. Or I killed myself yesterday and resurrected myself today. I then observed a praying mantis stay motionless longer than I could bear to watch.

I've often lain in bed wondering for what strange beast of this world I am prey. I've often lain in bed praying to some unknown god to come pluck me from this local stalk. I don't think death stalks me; I quest it as the most unique treasure. The praying mantis caught my attention because it was motionless. The wall it was upon wasn't moving either, this is true, but the motionlessness of a living being is more profound than the motionlessness of an object or idea or structure. My stationary ideas don't do much for me. I've often lain in bed with my thoughts clear in my brightest skies. I've never lain in bed as a blank slate but I've had pillowtime with myself as dullard and coward and fraud. Death isn't a blanket and I know nothing of shrouds. Thus my jaws and joints and turning head work with evolutionary efficiency. And thus I know that most days are squandered from the moment we understand they can be.

I didn't die today or yesterday with enough conviction. Death eludes me because I can't stay still long enough. I'm not an effective hunter. I can't, I admit, become a stone, but I try to emulate its essence long enough to fool my prey. I killed myself today but failed to stay killed. Or I just rolled away the stone I cannot be. My blood will cease its blithe motion along its day and night rounds, but only temporarily. And thus I often crawl into bed with myself and die in my arms and I awake the next morning as if nothing ever happened.

Some days I suspect death will kill me by forever eluding me. Death isn't a vow and I know nothing of covenants. I have the grip of a happy janitor. What joy to be starry-eyed in the days of fortunate children. I'd eat cotton candy the way some men eat meat. I've often lain in bed thinking my body was hewn out of living poplar by a bored shepherd. I dream I take my warrior's helmet into pink rooms of privilege. I'm neither bloodthirsty nor sweaty with creamlust. I'll settle for whisper and flourish and the low breath of grateful. I'll cup the tremble in my palms and set it somewhere safe. I feel empathy only for those who feel no empathy for themselves.

I carry a totem in my pocket. When I plant it in blonde soil it grows beyond my ken or kin, taller than my tallest tiptoeing, a stalk beyond my ascent, a lightning rod for any vengeful god. My totem isn't garrolous around strangers. In my pocket its four faces keep silent, although there are times I think I can feel them humming as if they wished to break out in song. Out of my grave, should I ever merit a grave, will grow some frightful barbershop quartet of harmony and torment.

I killed myself today. Or I'll kill myself tomorrow. To kill oneself isn't simple but it's easier than staying dead. I can't inanimate myself. I've never lain in bed wishing I could be just as I am. I lie in bed staring at something beyond the ceiling that isn't anything. This is the only trick up my sleeve. It almost grants me the power of absolutely nothing.

But when I divide myself by myself there is always a remainder.

And when I subtract myself from myself something small is always left.

I'm closer to zero than one—this I know.

I'll kill myself tomorrow or the next day. An act of nostalgia, not of desperation. It pops into my mind as something to do and I do it. Then I come back around as if I were sunup. This

isn't a life but a way of being. This is a physical law. I self-slay and I self-redeem. I've never lain in bed as if I'll never rise again into this world. I've never lain in bed terminally ill but I've had fevertime with myself as saint and martyr and stooge. And thus I know there are moments in our lives when we are more than the world makes of us. Thus my jaw and joints and turning head work with intelligent design.

I killed myself yesterday and again today. Death holds me as if I were its orbiting satellite. Only the death of death will release me into oblivion.

I killed myself after I awoke this morning and I'll kill myself before I go to sleep tonight. When I don't know what to do with myself, I kill myself. I kill myself in summer and I kill myself in winter. I kill myself with myself and by myself and for myself. I kill myself with kindness and I kill myself with malice. Then I resurrect myself without lifting a bloody finger.

I risk everything when seeking death: my body, my mind, my heart. And all I get is another breath. Followed by another and yet another, ad nauseum. My soul's sense of humor eludes me.

The faces in my totem aren't those of my blood ancestors. They're four ugly men I've never met, all of whom are unrelated to me. I carved them into the wood as if I were inspired. Perhaps they're the four horsemen of the apocalypse without their mounts. Perhaps they're those gentlemen responsible for the gospels. Perhaps they're important figures in my nation's history. They look to me like townsmen I'd hate if I loved their daughters or their sons or the woods beyond their homes.

The four faces of my totem speak almost exclusively in conflicting concert. They disagree in their critique of me. They disagree in their apology of me. They speak in the royal we but I hear in the first person. They say and sing things too

muddled to translate to a general audience. It is folderol—to paraphrase and tidy them, as if I were a child at an academic symposium—resembling such: God bites my tongue. God minds my business. God blacks my purple. God clans my cross—God slams my door. God speaks my mind. God winters my bed. God fails my test.

All simultaneous. All in harmonious discord. Trundling along like the chants of brave simpletons, neither wise, pithy, nor funny, but insistent: God smacks my lips. God pops my weasel. God crowns my queen. God mates my king—God wets my whistle. God splits my hairs. God spills my beans. God folds my hand—God shorts my sheets. God shorts my shrift. God cleans my clock. God kicks my bucket—God burns my toast. God edges my seat. God splits my side. God flies my time.

Or less rhythmical, as night whispers, in formal tones: God steps out of one's heart into one's imagination. There God runs amok. Anything is possible—even godlessness—in one's imagination. Get out! one yells. God's not a good minder. To rid one's mind of God one reads a little history—God steps out of one's heart onto the stage of one's auditorium and takes a bow and does a cartwheel and a somersault and a back flip and curtsies. God is comfortable in the spotlight. A standing ovation. An encore. More histrionics. This goes on forever—God steps out of one's heart and launches one out of one's galaxy to the edges of the Universe. Once there, one is allowed to peer into the vast expanses of darkest void. So what? One is unimpressed. Everything grows cold but one—God steps out of one's heart and one sleeps and never wakes. Then one wakes and never sleeps again. One slept and woke and will never again sleep. One doesn't imagine God. One's imagination is God. God—unsatisfied with the stewards of Creation—makes a flood, as if Time were irreversible to God.

The faces in my totem switch places. How they do this,

I admit, is a mystery to me. I must have carved them in a specific order, and the wood, one would think, would hold those forms within the natural properties of wear and decay. One day the hawk-nosed gentleman is on top. The next day it might be the heavy-browed fellow. This is no longer disconcerting. As humans, we can grow accustomed to almost anything. Like the telling incident with the praying mantis, it should be said that when I hold the totem in my hand and stare at it, waiting to witness transmutation, it withstands my patience, it resists my observational prowess.

Immortality, or at least the illusion of immortality, is beyond getting used to.

Sometimes I love myself. Still, it's futile. I must take that feeling out back and drown it in a bucket. Loneliness makes me want to kill myself. Crowds make me want to kill myself. My love for myself is unrequited.

I kill myself at noon and I'm alive again for tea. I kill myself to create myself. That's a story some might want to convince themselves of, but it isn't the truest truth. The truer truth is that I kill myself because I can. Simple as that. I just lack the skills to make it stick, to canonize my suicide, so to speak. If I can practice enough and get better I may yet succeed. Until then, I'll play with my totem, plant it in blonde soil, watch it grow beyond my tiptoeing, and listen while its four mouths berate and comfort me.

They chastise me, this quartet, for living without living, for caring about what I look like or what I'm wearing when I kill myself. They applaud me for my perseverance. I have the jawline of a trusting cowboy. What bliss to be light-hearted in the days of magnanimous wolves. I've often lain in bed thinking of my plasma as magma passed off as stew in a smalltown diner. I dream I take my milky sword into infidel lands and excise rot. I'm neither bloodthirsty nor sweaty with perfection. I'll settle for gratitude and applause and the rapid

breath of humility. I'll hold beheaded pride in the air and post it somewhere seen. I feel sympathy only for those who have known only sympathy.

I kill myself with words because I was created of word. I am word. And not a very good one either. Just a run-of-the-mill garden variety to be used in provincial prose. I might be marked obsolete within a century but I could still be found in some musty unabridged neighborhood.

To have a totem doesn't make me special. Having a totem makes no one special. Anybody with a knife and a stick can make a totem. Lacking a blade, I suppose teeth or fingernails could do the job, given time. To get the faces to speak and sing is either a trick or a miracle or lunacy. If trick, it is by nature deceptive, and the truth will rise to the surface. If miracle, it is a frontier beyond one's claim and outside our understanding. If lunacy, it is either imaginative delusion, supernatural possession, or chemical imbalance. In all of these options, the choice was chosen before any god was met, before any soul was harrowed.

I kill myself as first choice, not as last resort.

—*Tim Ramick*