

Dead noise. You can hear shuffling and readjusting, almost like Tom started the recording before he was ready. There's a heavy sigh to bring the recording in.

TOM JACKSON

Is there anything left to say?

I know now no one is listening. How could they be? It was just a . . . hope, a wish on a star that was too far to reach. Even now, floating amongst them, I'm not able to hold of one. Do I care? Did I really believe people would hear this one day, or did I always know.

Whatever. It doesn't matter.

No one knows that Tom Jackson has 3 days to live. I don't even know how long I've been out here anymore. Stopped keeping track Why would I? It doesn't change anything. Doesn't make the days shorter, pass slower or quicker.

You know what's the worst part? Even now, I'm on my deathbed, I'm all alone. . . I can't be myself. I've been trying to be funny, and brave, and wise. And all I am is sad.

And dead soon.

I'm making something out of my pain because otherwise what's the point of hurting? Would anyone care about my suffering if it didn't help them? If

my pain was just pain, and only that,
and only mine, would it matter
anymore?

How can anything like this matter?

With a pause, the questions turn into something much
more gentle.

TOM

(softly)

Did y'all know I miss rain? I do. I
miss rain so much. The sound of it on
the roof of my car, the smell of it on
concrete on a hot day, the dark, dark
skies of midwest thunderstorms, makin'
it almost night. Did you know they
never get like that in California;
it's always just a little bit of rain.
Or if it's a thunderstorm, the sky's
somehow still this light blue grey.
It's never what I think of when I
think of thunderstorms, black, rolling
clouds and dramatic lightning and all
that crashing noise. Nothing can hold
a candle to the city's "natural"
noise.

Suddenly, he seems almost fond of the city, for the
first time.

TOM

Although, I do remember, when thunder
would go off in the city, the car
alarms up and down the street would
sound, cause this huge cacophony of
noise that was nearly unbearable.

The same thing, the same storm, was so different across the country, so loud but in such a different way. Things can be exactly the same and yet unrecognizable with distance or time. If the Missouri thunderstorms met the California ones, would they recognize each other? Or would they only see the differences, like I do?

I wonder if there are planets out here that have rain. I wonder if it would still sound the same, even with ALL that distance. I mean, that's always the question, isn't it? If there are other planets like ours? We can put all the science and math in, we can do everything logically and rationally, we can go to governments for funding. But at the end of the day, we're just looking for someone like us, hoping to anything we can we're not alone.

Sometimes I think that's the one thing we have in common: feeling like we have nothing in common.

He chuckles softly. Takes a moment.

TOM

Is it raining at home? Do you think?

He laughs.

TOM

I'm gonna miss so much, aren't I? I'm gonna miss so much. Can you miss something after you're gone, after you

die? Is that possible? I think I'll find a way.

You know what's funny? I'm gonna miss things that were so mundane the same amount I'm gonna miss the big things.

I'm gonna miss mashed potatoes the same amount I'm gonna miss my friends. I'm gonna miss the sound of the mourning doves in the live oaks in the late mornings the same amount I'll miss my home. I'm gonna miss my old pond the same way I'm gonna miss my wife.

I'm gonna miss the ocean. I remember the first time I saw it was when I moved for college. I drove the whole way in my busted up old truck, barely keepin' it just alive those 3 days of drivin', and when I hit Slo - uh, San Luis Obispo - where my college was, I didn't feel like stopping. So I kept driving til I hit the ocean - I think it was Pismo Beach - and you know, I parked my car before the sand. I remember getting out of my truck and almost not being able to close the door because the wind was so strong, it was, you know, wrenching it from my grasp. As I walked down to the beach, that same wind was whipping the sand up, I remember it stinging my cheeks. I was so excited to see the ocean, but my hair had grown a little long, so I had to keep pushing it out of my face and reaching up to see. But when I

finally could see it, it stopped me
dead in my tracks.

That was the ocean. The actual thing
right in front of me.

David and I had always talked about
seeing it one day. When we learned
about the water cycle in school, we
were fascinated to find out that it
held the same water that we played in
every summer day. I liked to argue
that that meant we had actually been
in the ocean before. He disagreed.

But, looking at it now (or then I
guess), I can't help but think I was
right. That big swell of grey water, I
knew it. I'd been in it before. You
know? It was familiar in a way it
really shouldn't have been. I think
about that now, that first glimpse of
something bigger than me, something I
could lose myself in. I don't know. I
think maybe I always knew I was gonna
die that way, and kinda just now
realized that I was right and that
this is how. I just feel this. . .
grief. I remember, with the wind
whipping like that, and there was a-
this light rain that was falling, I
could. . . I could really. . . do
whatever I wanted; no one could hear
me. So I was singing this song under
my breath into the wind. And I can't
remember what the song was now, but it
was something about wanting to be near
someone.

The only thing I could hear over the wind was - at one point an airplane went over my head, and I looked up at this airplane full of luckier people than me. And when I looked back around at this empty beach, I wondered if there was anyone else on earth besides me. You know, was it just me there?

Is it just me?

Tell me, if you can: how do I stop making everything about home? This grief of fog and ocean spray and stars. Do I think I can tell the difference between this pain and all the rest?

I don't know. It's just weird what I'll miss. Sitting in hard church pews, driving around towns I wanted out of, the ocean, rain, soup, walks.

I'm just. . . really tired. Yeah. That's all.

My feet hurt from walking all this way. And I'm tired of it all. It's been so long. It's alright, it's alright. I did so well for so long. And it's okay.

I remember. Before this, I had, um, I had really only dealt with grief once. It was when I was young, I think I was about 10, uh, David had some of his boarding school friends visiting. I

didn't really like to hang out with them. I was always quieter around them, always a little bitter and jaded. I couldn't say why. I think I got mad he got to go to boarding school and make all those friends and I was stuck just having him as my, you know, one friend.

Or something like that, anyway.

But as they were playing in David's lawn, I was over in my yard. Uh, I was pretending to pick up my toys and clean up the yard, but I was really just spying on them, shooting them glances every so often. There was one boy in particular who David was spending the most time around. And he looked like a real dillweed, pulling David around the yard to the next toy and, you know, monopolizing his time.

Didn't he know? David led.

Didn't he know that no one was supposed to make him do anything? It made me mad, but David didn't seem as bothered by it as I did, you know, laughing with the boy and playing amiably. I realized I hadn't actually stopped to pick up a toy in a while and bent down to maintain my cover.

The moment I did that, all of a sudden, I heard this commotion going on behind me and this panicked squaking and I whirled around to see

this stray cat attacking this mourning dove. And I yelled and ran over; I was trying frantically to wave off the cat's attack. It scrambled for safety when it noticed my charge, but I was too late. The dove just lay there. I hesitated to get close at first, but kinda crept slowly to its body.

It was then that I noticed the noise from next door had stopped. I kinda instantly knew what happened. Before I could touch the bird, the boys were swarming around me. I didn't know how much of the commotion they'd seen, I just knew that they decided it was more interesting than whatever game they were playing. So as they crowded around, I- I-

Tom sighs, running his hands through his hair in distress remembering.

TOM

-well, I started to panic. I could hear all these voices asking if I'd killed the bird, how I did it, if it was my bird I had killed. I knew they hadn't seen the cat, but I had no idea what to do. I started spinning in circles, looking at all of them surrounding me trying to lock onto someone, trying to form words to say something to defend myself, to explain. But I just circled, looking at all these strangers who had the gall to ask me if I killed this

innocent thing. How could they say that?

Their voices got louder and louder and louder, and I- I think I started to tear up; I was overwhelmed. Their voices bounced around and around. I was trying to figure out what to listen to. And then:

"Thomas".

His voice was hushed but I still heard it over all of the others, saying my name.

I spun around to see him, the other boys parting to let him through, like some golden Moses. He was smaller than everyone else, but he commanded so easily. He never look his eyes off me as he walked toward me and the bird. The words came tumbling out of me.

"David, there was a cat, you've got to believe me, please, David, please, you know that I would never- could never-

He held up a hand to stop me. And looked at the bird. And bent down to inspect it. Then looked back up at me.

"The cat got it."

It wasn't a question when he said it. He knew. A wave of relief washed over me. Of course he'd understand. He's David.

I nodded furiously, shaking the droplets of rain that I hadn't noticed had started to fall off my hair.

He nodded. He looked back at the bird. Then he said, "The rain will wash it away. Leave it be."

The boys lost interest and wandered back over to David's house. But he and I stood together looking at the bird, him crouched close to it, me standing over them both. I had never seen anything dead before. You know, we weren't close to our grandparents, I didn't have any unfortunate accidents with my parents, I had no siblings to lose. It looked kinda peaceful, which was odd considering how it died. Maybe it didn't remember. It was so small and fragile, I thought it was a miracle it had lasted this long on the earth. David eventually wandered back to his friends, but I stayed all day looking at the corpse. Something in me broke with that sight, but I wasn't sure what and I was worried if I moved or thought about it, it would come to me. So I just stayed still and empty. I felt hollow. . . but I've heard that hollow bones are what make birds fly, so. Maybe.

I didn't realize when the sun started to set. I didn't realize that it had been pouring rain all day. I didn't realize all his friends had gone. I

didn't realize the bird had been swept away by the flood in the backyard. I didn't move until I heard him call my name.

I turned and there he was, soaking wet. He held out his hand to me, palm up, and looked me in the eye. He blinked some water off his eyelashes and said, "Thomas. Come in out of the rain now."

And so I put my hand on his, feeling the warmth he must've just come outside from. I wondered how long he had watched me from his window, whether he knew to wait and look and let me be for a bit, or whether he couldn't take it and had to come get me once he saw. He closed his fingers over mine and pulled me inside and the world began all over again for me. And I followed him in for dinner.

There's a long heavy pause. He sniffs heavily before trying to continue.

TOM

And it-.

But he doesn't know what he's going to say. What he wants to say.

TOM

So much could've happened. And it's my fault. It's all my fault.

But tomorrow. Tomorrow. I'm too tired
right now. God, I'm so tired. I want
to rest. For a moment. Yeah. For a
moment, let me sit in the shade and
not have to tell my stories. Tomorrow.