

The Dam
Daniel Marcus

“Not far from where I used to live in Western Massachusetts, there was a reservoir much like the one in this story, a project from the 30s to bring water to thirsty Boston, sacrificing the thriving, vibrant towns of the Swift River Valley. Every time I drove past those still blue waters, I thought of the houses, stores, and roads beneath, of the lives that had traversed that submerged geography, and sometimes imagined myself down there in one of the houses, looking out a parlor window at the dappled surface above.”

I N ONE BEAKER, prepare a solution of seventy-six percent sulfuric acid, twenty-three percent nitric acid and one percent water. In another beaker, prepare a solution of fifty-seven percent nitric acid and forty-three percent sulfuric acid. Percentages are given by weight, not volume.

I was standing on the causeway that runs across the top of the dam, looking out over the reservoir. It had been raining for days and the water was the color of milky tea.

“It’s good,” a voice behind me said.

I whirled around, nearly jumping out of my skin.

“Jesus, Oscar, you scared the daylights out of me.”

“It’s good when it’s like this,” he said, his eyes grey and empty as the sky. A small rivulet of drool escaped from the corner of his mouth.

“What’s good?” I asked.

“The Dragon cannot live in water that is too pure,” he said.

He was looking through me, out across the water. Beneath his hat, dripping wet from the rain, I knew that there was a depressed concavity in his skull, as if someone had taken a tennis ball and pushed it deep into soft putty. The hair there grew thick and curly.

Beneath the muddy brown water, the towns slept.

Ten grams of the first solution are poured into an empty beaker and placed in an ice bath.

My house is at the end of the causeway, just off the road. It was originally the caretaker's house and it sends roots down into the guts of the dam, basement, sub-basement, sub-sub-basement, the water heavier in the air the deeper you descend until it beads on the walls in thick, fat drops. I have never been to the bottom.

Levers and wheels protrude from the walls next to the rickety metal stairway that threads the levels. It is always cold down there, and always, somewhere, there is the slow, steady sound of water dripping into water.

Sometimes I go down three levels, four levels, and turn one of the wheels at random. Pause. Cock my head to listen. It is there, just at the threshold of perception, the sound of great forces being set into motion.

Add ten grams of toluene and stir for several minutes.

Last night there was an incredible aurora display, gaudy neon curtains rippling across the sky in a cosmic breeze. It went on for hours. Last time it was this good was a couple of years ago. A scientist from back east stopped the night at the Broken Nail and a cluster of people gathered around him in the tavern, pumping him for news. But all he wanted to talk about was the aurora.

"Ionization in the upper atmosphere," he said.

Later that night, Billy, who used to run the gas station, killed him for his radio. For months afterward, he wore the man's teeth on a necklace whenever he showed up in town, but somebody must have talked to him, because he stopped.

I asked him about it once. It was Saturday and the Farmer's Market was in town. Billy was holding a head of cabbage in one hand, lifting it to the light like it was Yorick's skull and he Hamlet.

“Where’s your necklace, Billy?” I asked.

He looked at me.

“Ionization in the upper atmosphere,” he said, and wandered off, laughing.

Remove the beaker from the ice bath and gently heat until it reaches fifty degrees Centigrade. Stir constantly.

Four towns were erased when the reservoir was created as a CCC project back in the thirties. Prescott, Alice, Machinery, Thor. If I had any more children, I would name them thus.

Several people refused to move when the time came. An old woman living in the house her great-grandfather had built as a newly-freed slave fleeing Reconstruction. A young man whose wife had died in childbirth the previous year, his daughter stillborn. An idiot. The town drunk of Machinery. I wonder if the waters rose slowly, ushering them gently into the next world, or if they looked up suddenly to see a wall of blue steel and white foam rushing down upon them, higher than the trees, bearing the weight of Judgment.

I suspect the former. On nights when the sky is clear and the full moon hangs suspended in the sky like a cold, blue lamp, the juncture between air and water fades to nothing and the water itself becomes transparent. My boat glides along the silent surface and I look down upon the valley as if the water were a kind of amber, freezing time to stillness. Roads, hills, stores, houses. It is a time machine, this reservoir.

Fifty additional grams are added from the first beaker and the mixture heated to fifty-five degrees Centigrade. This temperature is held for the next ten minutes. An oily liquid will begin to form on top of the acid.

I sit in my house at the edge of the causeway and monitor the level of the water. For this service, the people of the town bring me food, woven items, firewood. From time to time, Oscar wanders up from his tarpaper shack behind

the old train station and stands in the middle of the causeway, looking out across the water. Always across the water, never the other side. Never the town.

Last week, I saw him there from the window of my house, standing in his usual spot. I brought him a strip of jerky and an apple and stood next to him facing the opposite direction, down the curve of the dam and along the valley floor to the curls of smoke from town braiding into the grey sky.

After ten or twelve minutes, the acid solution is returned to the ice bath and cooled to forty-five degrees Centigrade. The oily liquid will sink to the bottom of the beaker. The remaining acid solution should be drawn off using a syringe.

The residents of the sunken valley populate my dreams.

A pair of schoolteachers, sisters, lovers, spinsters to the town of Prescott, holding each other and everything unspoken as the waters rose.

A man just outside Alice who murdered his wife for the insurance money. He made it look like an accident. It was so convincing, in fact, that years later he himself believed it.

A resident of Thor who made an occasional practice of driving to neighboring towns under the still of night and killing dogs with a crossbow. He rendered the flesh from their bones and carefully reconstructed their skeletons, like model airplanes, in his attic.

The proprietor of the Mill End Store in Machinery who nursed elaborate masturbatory fantasies about raping and murdering young boys. As the years passed, the fantasies grew more and more baroque. He was active in the church community and ran the Christian Youth Fellowship's Helping Hand for Troubled Teens camp every summer.

I can feel them looking up at me as my boat glides slowly through the air.

Fifty more grams of the first acid solution are added to the oily liquid while the temperature is slowly being raised to eighty-three degrees Centigrade. After this temperature is reached, it is maintained for a full half hour.

Elly Foss gave birth to a two-headed baby last week. It cleaved together at the breastbone, both heads crying in unison when it came out. A single pair of arms waved feebly in the air. Her husband, Jack, took it by the legs and slammed it against the wall. He says it's no baby of his. Elly isn't saying much of anything. There's a lot of talk going around, as they have two normal children, both obviously Jack's since they exhibit the same pattern of delicate webbing between their toes that Jack has. Veins lace through the translucent skin like the architecture of a drunken spider.

At the end of this period, the solution is allowed to cool to sixty degrees Centigrade and is held at this temperature for another full half hour. The acid is again drawn off, leaving once more the oily liquid at the bottom.

In the reservoir lives a catfish the size of a man. Massive arms sprout from its body just beneath the gills and it uses them to move aside the debris that has been collected by the slow, Atlantean drift, to open the doors and enter the houses of Machinery and Prescott, of Alice and Thor. I close my eyes and I can see it floating next to a Colonial armoire in someone's master bedroom, reaching out a hand to touch the detailed filigree gone soft and pulpy in the cold depths, steadying itself in a sudden surge of current.

Last year, some fool from one of the hill towns came down and tried to catch it. He built a raft out of a garage door and four empty oil drums, bolted a stout, fiberglass pole onto the raft, and pushed himself off into the calm water.

He used kittens for bait. Through binoculars, I saw him impale their tiny bodies on curved hooks and drop them wriggling into the water. I imagined that I could hear their sharp cries.

Every now and then, he'd get a hit, the pole bending like a bow, pulling that end of the raft halfway into the water. Then it would stop and the raft would spring back and bob up and down like a cork.

A small crowd gathered on the causeway to watch his progress. He was doomed, already dead, and he didn't even know it.

But we did.

After a long stretch of quiet, the rocking of the raft from the last hit damped to an almost imperceptible bob and silence hanging over the lake like heat haze, our fish burst out of the water right in front of him. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, leaping into the air in a silver blur, the sun catching rainbow highlights off scales rippling like mercury. Before we had time to blink, it grabbed the man in its huge hands and pulled him into the water. The raft skidded off to the side, bobbing, bobbing. Eventually, it drifted to shore on the north side of the dam and got caught up in the branches of a fallen tree, half-submerged.

It's still there.

Thirty grams of sulfuric acid are added while the oily liquid is heated to eighty degrees Centigrade. All temperature increases must be accomplished slowly and gently.

Oscar was on the causeway before dawn, looking out across the water. I brought him a heel of dark bread and some cheese. He took the items from me without a word and pushed them into his mouth.

"It's mine," he said, chewing vigorously on the wad of food. Crumbs clung to his lips.

"Excuse me?"

He closed his eyes and swallowed, then motioned to the canteen hanging from my shoulder. I gave it to him and he unscrewed the top and held it to his lips. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. When he was done, he wiped his lips on his sleeve.

"The baby is mine," he said, handing me back the canteen.

I looked closely at him. Wind whistled up from the town side of the causeway, pushing between us, as if reminding me of what I had to do. I returned to the house. When I looked out at the causeway again, he was gone.

Once the desired temperature is reached, thirty grams of the second acid solution are added. The temperature is raised from eighty degrees Centigrade to

one hundred four degrees Centigrade and is held there for three hours.

I dreamed that I was in a house on the outskirts of Machinery, sitting weightless in the living room. Tiny ceramic animals clustered together on the mantle. A grandfather clock wedged into a corner of the room emitted a muffled ticking.

I floated over to the window and looked out. There, just above the level of the treetops, a small boat gliding slowly past, a lone figure rowing.

Lower the temperature of the mixture to one hundred degrees Centigrade and hold it there for thirty minutes.

When I awoke the next morning, there was a basket of bread and jerky on my doorstep. Underneath the lean-to next to the shed in back, a half-cord of wood that hadn't been there the night before.

They flayed him alive and nailed him to a telephone pole in front of the burned-out shell of the First Presbyterian Church, just off the town commons.

I brought him some water. I set up a stepladder next to the pole and climbed with a pail and a ladle up to where he hung. He'd been there all day and most of the night before and he smelled pretty bad, blood and waste and something I couldn't identify, maybe his sorry old soul hovering nearby, waiting for an excuse to leave. An aura of flies surrounded him. His skin hung in strips; the muscles in his arms and legs were marbled with veins of yellow fat. An old scar sprawled across his shoulder, shiny runnels and bubbles like a sheet of melted plastic.

"Oscar," I said. "Oscar. How about a drink?"

His eyes flickered open. Imprecation, accusation, a burning grace.

The oil is removed from the acid and washed with boiling water. Stir constantly. The TNT will begin to precipitate out. Add cold water. Pellets will form.

The Dragon cannot live in water that is too pure. I charged up a pair of car batteries from the generator beneath my house and wired them to a simple spring-release mechanism. Took the device to the foot of the dam. Looked up at the broad sweep of concrete filling the sky, colors bright like a postcard from someplace where the ocean is nearby. Set the timer and clambered up the side of the valley through the dense undergrowth, branches scratching at my face like flailing arms.

Just as I reached the top, I heard a sound like a door slamming shut on an empty room. I turned around. A billowing, grey mushroom hurtled into the sky and a network of cracks spread across the face of the dam. Water broke out in discrete gushing sprays, the cracks widening, then all at once it gave, collapsing in a churning froth of water, concrete, earth.

The causeway was gone; my house hung on the blunt edge of nothing. A wall of water pushed through the valley, covering everything. Behind the advancing front, the roiling foam was a deep, rich brown.

To my right, the waters receded. First, the tall steeples of churches were revealed, then the houses, finally the streets and roads. Prescott and Machinery, Alice and Thor. They glistened, pure in the sunlight.

Note: The temperatures used in the preparation of TNT are exact. Do not rely on estimates or approximations. A good thermometer is essential.

Author's note: I am grateful to William Powell's *The Anarchist Cookbook* for the TNT recipe.