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Ascend, Descend, Amygdala in Duress

Lately, the word ascension has been surfacing more and more, along with *ascend*, its root. The term originates from the Latin *ad*, meaning “to,” and *scandere*, meaning “climb.” The word and its different forms of speech have been adopted widely as western terms to describe the climbing of many things—ladders, stairs, social strata, thrones, morality, afterlives, celestial position, and countless other inclines. Inclines that lie ahead in space and time. To move toward higher elevations is to ascend to them. The experience of ascension is appealing, magnetic. Some are drawn toward it, upward to it, as an optimistic conclusion to whatever low living came before.

There is a specific type of almond called the bitter almond. Unlike their milder, tastier supermarket relatives, the bitter almond is unsavory to humans, the result of an aversion developed over the many thousands of years humans evolved in the region now called Iran. The bitter almond is still abundant in this region, but foragers beware. What’s bitter about this almond is a toxin capable of natural molecular decomposition once it is ingested and digested by humans. Its sugar and hydrogen molecules break down, leaving a different compound behind, called cyanide. Cyanide first makes the body feel hot and sleepy before it makes the body dead. The naturally occurring, bitter-tasting compound found in bitter almonds is called amygdalin, from the Greek word, *amygdale*, which translates to *almond*. In summary: early Mesopotamians gathered and ate deadly almonds, deadly enough that they began to taste nasty, until a scientist in 1830 finally decided to name its toxin after the

nut, rather than proposing a name change to the nut itself. Amygdalin: the almond toxin.

I am suddenly a child again, of an age somewhere between four and nine, young enough to be frightened by nightmares but old enough to remember. My mother calls me *the man of the house*, which feels forced because at such a young age I cannot grasp manhood. Anxious, I ask her what she means, and she clarifies; it is only for a few days and my father is going to return home before I know it. I believe her. I trust her. No reason not to because she doesn't lie. I don't have a sibling yet and my mother doesn't work, only my father does. He travels for business; not weekly, but often. So, she pays me more attention than is enough and brings me to all of the places she believes are important. To school. The drug store. Neighbors' houses to socialize. The library. The summer carnivals. She tucks me in each night and like the exemplary mother that she is she wishes me to have *sweet dreams*. However, while I'm *the man of the house*, my dreams are often not sweet. They can be bitter, foul, and emotional, those terrific nightmares that invade and overtake. I lay in bed, sweaty and worried, hot from all my blankets, unable to sleep until sleep's descent turns involuntary.

The full definition of *ascend* cannot be construed without also considering its antonym, *descend*. This is because *descend* carries an equivalent yet opposite complexity, descending the physical—ladders, stairs, planes, hot air balloons—and descending the conceptual—ranks, ethics, emotional states, afterlives. To move toward lower elevations is to descend to them. Much like *ascend*, one can descend *to* or *from*, the direction dependent upon the contextual demands. Descending to someone is different than descending from someone; the former by choice as one might bequeath something, the latter by unavoidable inheritance. By surname. By parental edict. By blood. A descendant. Oddly—no—dreadfully, one can also descend *upon*, implying that harm is to be done.

Amygdalin can be found in the seeds and pits of other fruits. Apricots. Peaches. Plums. Apples. Cherries. Fortunately for fans of these fruits, the pits are too big and typically tossed aside, or they are small enough to be passed if accidentally swallowed down. To repeat the warning is prudent; grinding or chewing these kernels, seeds, or pits too much will cause fatigue and occasionally death. Both mild and severe cases requiring medical intervention have been reported. Eating the sweet flesh of the fruit will have the opposite effect,

though. Rarely are these cases reported upstream. Peaches and apples, favored especially when hand-picked, can make for especially lively afternoons.

In the nightmare it is dark and I'm lying in my bed staring at the invisibly black ceiling, my bedroom door always open a crack. Light creeps in. Again, I'm only *this many* years old, so my senses invent fear and demand the security of light, even if artificial. That is when I hear glass break. The glass breaks at the same volume every time, from the same direction. It is only twelve steps from here to there, through the doorway to the end of the hallway. I'm lying in bed counting the steps, another three to the top of the stairs that descend to the front door. A short staircase in what my mother calls a *raised ranch*. The glass. It might be a water glass, except that I hear the twisting metal handle and peeling weatherstrip sounds of our heavy metal front door beginning to wax open. My mother is asleep almost directly underneath me, below in the basement bedroom, alone. We're both alone. We're both heavy sleepers, but I'm wide awake, the covers now tossed aside while I sweat my silhouette into the sheets. My feet barely touch the floor, so I barely make a sound. Someone else, whose feet can touch, do touch, touching and dirtying the foyer landing, some hulking shadow is there. In the house. I decide.

Ascendent is naturally confused with *ascendant*. An *ascendant* *ascendent* is a rising parent, or, more generally, an upward-moving position of power or control. An *ascendent* *ascendant*, oddly, dreadfully, perhaps nightmarishly, can mean the same exact thing. One retains its Latin etyma while the other adopts a French variation. They are both a noun and an adjective. Both. So, too, are *descendent* and *descendant*. Kindred and symmetrical is each interchangeable pair. Coincidentally concurrent and perhaps altogether *ascendant*.

This information about the brain, is another adjacent scientific fact related to bitter almonds that kill and to peaches that enliven afternoons. *In vivo*, at the center of the brain tissue, confined deep beneath the cerebrum, south of the thalamus but north of the cerebellum, nestled alongside its *alma mater* the hippocampus, is the almond-shaped mass which neuroscience calls the amygdala. One of its primary functions is to control emotional response as it relates to survival. Anxiety. Fear. Flight. Aggression.

In the darkness of the hallway, I am peering around the corner into my father's normally empty office, opposite the staircase. The man is dressed in

black, very tall and slouching over, almost headless from this anterior angle, all heavy in the shoulders and hands. Gloved hands, leather hands. In his right hand is a crowbar. Sometimes, this is when I wake up, anxious. Other times, the office is empty as usual, and when I peer to the right, toward the staircase, at what is practically eye level for someone ascending the first stair, I see the black leather gloves, reaching in through the broken glass, unable to reach far enough inside to turn the knob. Then the glass breaks again, and again, angry at me, and I'm seeing the huge shoulders, entering and closing the door behind him. In his right hand is the crowbar. Sometimes, this is when I wake up, afraid. Other times, the office is empty as usual, and looking right I see the door that is already open. Too late to witness the breaking and entering, I begin to rise slowly from crouching, seeing glass broken, angry already, and I'm looking down to see the man there below. He is broad, heavy in the shoulders, and hunching over, ducking down into the basement from the lower flight of stairs, to descend upon the basement bedroom, and I don't wake up. I don't wake up at the sight of his crowbar. I don't peel away in fear. Instead, I see myself leaping over the banister, wrapping my arms around his huge neck. I make myself heavy, heavier than his shoulders. A brave stunt meant only for dreams, never nightmares. He is shouting, angry and leathery, which is all I truly want. A shout to send a warning call downstairs to my mother—to be the man of the house. In the end, the nightmare mandates that his right hand drops the crowbar, and that there be a moment of terror in the time it takes the crowbar to hit the concrete basement floor as his leather hand reaches for my face. I'm never sure if I make a difference. The crowbar sound always wakes me up.