

Muses

Abigail Mandlin

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2020

Committee:

Ted Hiebert

Rebecca Brown

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Creative Writing and Poetics

©Copyright 2020

Abigail Mandlin

University of Washington

Abstract

Muses

Abigail Mandlin

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Ted Hiebert

School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

Mental illness is a hurricane: It has no mercy; it takes no prisoners. When you're in it, there's nothing else to think of other than survival. The rain beats down on you; the winds are unceasing.

But what of when it's over?

When the sun comes out and the gale settles, the wreckage still remains. You're left on your own to pick up the pieces. What lies beyond the storm?

One writer strives to find out.

Based on some true events
(and some fabricated.)

Dedicated to all those who didn't wash up ashore.

Prologue

John Keats had it all figured out, didn't he? Dying at the capital-R Romantically young age of twenty-five, he left behind a veritable treasure trove of poetry that most people can't ever hope to replicate, even given entire lifetimes ahead of them.

That's the thing about competing with ghosts though: They always have a head start.

...

I point the knife away from me when I'm finished buttering my bread.

It's a little off-kilter, so I end up nudging it again. It's a stupid thing to be concerned about, I know, when the rest of the kitchen is in disarray. There's approximately seventeen dirtied knives in the sink, all taunting me, but they're not facing me right now, so it's *fine*. The laundry on the floor, the cups on the nightstand... I have about three hour's worth of updates to wait through on my computer alone, but nothing—*nothing*—in that moment seems to hold the same amount of emotional weight as the butter knife in front of me, right now.

I don't know why I bother. I just end up lobbing it in the sink, with the rest of them.

...

Philosopher and eternal pessimist Friedrich Nietzsche once began an essay with: "In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into

which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the history of the world.”

“Cognition,” I think, is the operative word here. Not sentience, not being. Cognition: the ability to take in information and interpret it.

My mother calls depression the “thinking person’s illness.” As in, she believes you have to have a certain level of awareness of the world to be affected by it, to be *saddened* by it.

While I’m not sure that’s entirely true, there is some level of logic to it. Why else, then, would we burden ourselves as a society with the colloquial phrase “ignorance is bliss”?

...

There’s another voicemail on my phone, the beady little red eye of the notification staring up at me from the screen. Just the threat of that—the mark of failure, of inefficiency—almost compelled me to answer the phone when it was ringing earlier, but I resisted, just barely.

My thumb finds the right area of the screen, to play it out.

“... if you have any work done, I’d love to take a look at it...”

“... that poetry you sent in was interesting, but I prefer you in prose...”

“... give me a call whenever you can, all right?”

I drop the phone on my bed, crawling to the headboard to draw a throw blanket up to my chin. I glance at my open laptop, where a writing application hasn’t been opened in some time.

And I think then, wrapped up in my own self-loathing, that I very much prefer me in prose too.

...

In the literary world, it’s called the objective correlative: when it rains during the sad part of a movie, when the environment mirrors the emotional tone of the moment.

But it didn't rain for years, then. I wish it had. I wish it'd been a torrential downpour, every day; I wish I'd been awash with poetics, overflowing with text, drowning in *meaning*.

Because then, when the sun did finally come out, I would have known for certain it was over.

...

My stomach voices its distinct displeasure at being taken off medication into the bathroom sink.

It was almost the bathroom *floor*, so I suppose I should be grateful.

I want to call my therapist. No, better yet: I want to make a voodoo doll of her and stab little, tiny needles into it. These stray hairpins around the vanity would do nicely, I think, inately.

But then I retch again, throat caught in distinct displeasure, and my mind is occupied for a little while longer.

...

Purportedly, J.K. Rowling once considered breaking her own arm to get a deadline extended.

(Her husband apparently talked her out of it though.)

At the time I learned this, I thought it was quite the overreaction. Surely she could have found some other way, yes? Asked nicely for some more time? *Not* broke her arm but lied about it, wearing a sling to lend more credence to her story? For a writer, she was running critically low then, in the creativity department.

But that's what it does, the illness-that-must-not-be-named: swallows whole the ability to think, numbs through the capacity to feel. Makes big gestures small and small gestures miniscule.

The fog is so thick—so cloying—you almost want to break your own arm sometimes, just to make sure it's still there.

...

“Have you been writing any?”

I choke on my coffee, halfway down my throat.

“I'll take that as a no.”

I look away, occupied all at once by the pattern below my feet, repeating ad infinitum. “You know I hate when you ask me that.” Except I second-guess myself, not entirely sure I've actually ever told him, outside of my own head.

“Yeah—” And I breathe a sigh of relief. “—but you gotta get back on that horse eventually.”

Horse, I think, is rather apt. A massive creature with wild eyes, braying in front of me at the mere suggestion of being tamed.

Writing and I had once been good friends—or if not friends, business partners. Amicable, at the very least. I wrote; it wrote. I forgot to eat; it didn't judge. I stayed up all night; it was there for me, in the morning. I poured myself into the practice until there was nothing more left to pour.

And like a train running out of track, the only thing left for me to do once I stopped was to crash.

“I'm just...” I search for the appropriate term. “... lacking inspiration.”

“Well...” My brother crosses his arms, a thumb and forefinger held to his chin. “You’re smart. Put that dumb diploma to some use. What did the greats do, for inspiration?”

He means the literary giants, of course. Being a business major, he can’t name anyone aside from Shakespeare—but the idea is sound enough. What *did* they do? My head all at once feels weighted, cumbersome: a hindrance rather than an asset.

“Hey, stay with me,” my brother says, and his tone is clearly trying to pass the comment off as a joke, but the twitching of his lower mouth into a frown belies his concern. “Maybe you should do some research...? You always were good at that kind of stuff.”

True enough. Locking myself in my room for hours on end to look up the extensive history of how smallpox was eradicated or about how the popularization of the spelling “draft” overtook the spelling of “draught” or whether penguins could be gay or not was certainly one of strong suits. One of my only redeeming traits, really, if I was being honest with myself.

“I could do that,” I say, and it feels good, feels *organic*. To state I’m going to do something and actually mean it. I would have to go back—way back—and work my way forward. It’d be something to do anyway, apart from watching the same movies over and over again, reading the same books.

So I fetch a pen from my jacket pocket, tucking the cap between my teeth, and write vertically from top to bottom upon my arm: “DO SOMETHING FOR ONCE.”

...

The research is not going well.

Except that it is. It’s going *too* well. There’s too much stuff to know and not enough time—in the whole of the universe, maybe. Not for the first time, I curse the waste that was the last year, me roiling in my bed from a malady no one else could see.

One article leads to another leads to another. I even drag myself to the library, once, to check out a few classics I'd missed along the way. They queue upon my bedside table: a testament to my lack of progress. Because finishing one means that another will inevitably come to take its place.

I'm not smart enough for this, I think. As a kid, I'd often look up to the Marie Curies of the world: those who would lock themselves away in their work to the point of incapacitation. It seemed a badge of honor to me, a physical proof of dedication. It helped, of course, that they were geniuses, who could get away with that sort of thing.

I always was tetchy and sullen like a Tesla. I only wished I could be enough of a savant to justify it.

But alas, no such luck.

I stick post-it notes to my wall like one of those TV detectives piecing together a long string of crimes. I almost want to go out and buy red tape just to sell the concept more—but for what end, other than my own? I wonder, absently, if this is going to make me lose my security deposit, as I stick a tac or two alongside the paper.

When I've more or less finished, I stand back to look at it, with crossed arms.

A leads to B leads to C leads to D. Spoken word leads to cuneiform leads to hieroglyphics leads to Greek.

There. My finger finds the last post-it note on the far right, where I've written *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, then circled them in red.

Oh, there were older stories, of course. Recitations, collections of poetry, the Bible. But each of those were based off—if not entirely recording verbatim—actual history, people who lived and died, their feats, their blunders, embellished though they may be. Conversely, *The*

Iliad and *The Odyssey* features characters entirely of the imagination, set in the midst of a war that is largely considered to be fabricated. Gods and kings, half-deities and fair maidens, each a new creation.

But I'd gone to high school, read the words upon the page. Granted, I wasn't as fastidious in my studies back then as I would come to be—nor as personally invested—but I knew the stories, knew of the plot points, of what transpired.

“Tell me, O muse, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide...”

That's what I needed: a muse. That mysterious force of nature that brought art to the hearts of mortals, spilling from their tongues and fingertips. Inspiration that wove great tapestries, stirred armies to combat, had silk-skinned women writing late into the night under the shade of magnolia trees.

I look at my wall again, and a wild thought takes hold of me, then and there.

A pattern: a map to follow. This place to that place to the next and the next. *Direction*. Answers, even. That particular element that has eluded me time and time again, ever since a doctor handed me a pamphlet one frigid afternoon in November.

It was almost within my grasp again.

...

“Hey, can you watch my cat for... uh... approximately five months?”

A pause. Then, high and reedy—

“Wait, what?”

Part I:

Denial Is More Than Just a

River in Egypt Greece

Athens, Greece

i.

It's almost noon exactly when I land in Athens.

Not that I knew that when I was violently startled awake by the plane's wheels touching down in what appeared to me the goddamn middle of nowhere. It didn't help that I'd been asleep only for an hour at most, the time before that being occupied with an acute sense of panic, me pacing the aisles back and forth, staring down at my hands to watch them shake. Two flight attendants even had to talk me down the metaphorical cliff at one point, petting at my shoulders as though to soothe a frightened calf.

It didn't make me feel *better* per se, but it didn't make me feel any worse, either.

Athens International has got processing foreigners down pat, I note, as myself and the other passengers are made to follow a hallway built beside the terminal straight to customs, with no having to muddle through crowds or having to follow signs in languages we may not know.

It's only when I'm in line rifling through my duffle bag for my passport that a horrible dread finally sets upon me.

Oh god, what do I say?

The customs agent is going to absolutely tear me to shreds if I mumble out some flimsy explanation about how I'm here "find myself." Not that that's even accurate, really, but I

suspect I would somehow put myself in a *worse* scenario if I were to take the opportunity to expound upon the importance of literary study and theory, boring to death or otherwise pissing some poor Greek guy off in the process.

But then I get to the front and the man stamps my passport and sends me on my way, without a word.

Well.

That was easy.

It's approximately seven hundred billion degrees and rising as I approach the front of the airport. Automatic double-doors make any attempt at air condition entirely pointless—assuming, of course, there is any going, which I'm seriously starting to doubt at this point. Taxis stalling at the curb only add to the heat, exhaust pouring out of their tailpipes, air rippling like water around them.

I pass up a few taxis until I get one that speaks at least a little English, hoping it'll aid me.

"*Acropoli*, please," I pronounce carefully.

The driver turns around in his seat. "No hotel?"

"Later," I say, dismissive. I'm determined to use my time efficiently.

He shrugs and puts a cigarette out in a dish upon the middle console.

It takes a long while until any civilization comes into view. The airport is surrounded by an apparent mountain range, save for the Mediterranean flanking it on one side. We pass through a checkpoint along the way—a standard toll road, most probably—but the whole ordeal still has me holding my breath, as though I'm a fugitive being smuggled into the country rather than a nerd with a master's degree who sometimes refers to weed as "Mary Jane," unironically.

I honestly can't keep my eyes open, after that. It's like the entirety of my energy was sucked straight out of me.

So I wake to the cabby clearing his throat, looking at me from over his shoulder.

"O-oh—" I collect my bag, from the seat next to me. "Thank you. How much do I owe you?"

A lot, apparently. Transport here knows its worth. I dole out the appropriate amount of euro upon the sidewalk, the colorful bills feeling just as much like Monopoly money as they did when they were given to me at the airport exchange counter.

"Ah, wait—" I say, turning to knock on the driver's side window just as he begins to roll away. "I think you might have made a mistake...? Where is the Acropolis?"

The man merely points up from behind the glass, shaking his finger a little for emphasis.

I turn again, then following the side of the hill with my eyes: up a rocky terrain, past a collection of bleach-white houses situated at the fore, beyond a long, winding pathway, to the very top of a grand staircase.

I can just make out the columns—and only because the weather is particularly clear.

"Oh."

It seems I'm in for a hike.

Wonderful.

There's a gate I pass that acts as little more than a stepping stone between busy city-center and tourist destination. People amble by as I begin the ascent—heading in both directions, up and down—that look far more prepared for this than I. They have water bottles clipped to their belts, hats and sunglasses at the ready. All I brandish is a suitcase thrown over the shoulder, digging into my flesh at the clavicle and accumulating sweat at the brow.

I have to make a stop at the buildings, to catch my breath.

It looks to be a particularly old part of the city. The air isn't stained here like it is down below with the stench of smog and petrol, nor are the streets littered with advertisements for foodstuffs, merchants hollering at you from across the way.

It's quaint. Residential. The paths are narrowed, the windows merely lined with the occasional potted plant.

I take one more breath, steadying, before I reason with myself to move along.

Where they aren't slopes, there are stairs, and where there aren't stairs, there are *more stairs*. And then I come to find out they have the audacity to make me *pay* to see the Acropolis when I get there—as well as to get a sip of water, if I'm so inclined. A small part of me can't help but begrudgingly respect the hustle, even if the rest of me is remains livid at being taken advantage of.

I don't hesitate in paying their ransom fee though, as I *won't* be ascending this mountain again.

It's on the entry stairs to the Acropolis proper that I finally take a glance behind me—
—and a gasp catches in my throat.

The entirety of Athens lies before me: thousands upon thousands of structures huddled together, with alabaster facades and red roofs. A small area of foliage is tucked away before me, a sort of oasis within suburbia. And beyond that: those ever-present mountains, making the whole thing look miniscule in comparison.

I don't sit so much as fall down on my ass, suitcase handle slipping from my grip. The stairs are a nice spot to rest, anyway. Might as well put them to use in a way that actually benefits me.

“You look like you walked straight off the plane.”

I turn, taking in a middle-aged Greek woman to my side, where she’s taken up a post. She holds a cigarette between two fingers, consumed nearly to the end.

“I did,” I admit.

“Hm?” Her tone is that of mild interest. She sits down beside me, sliding the nub of the cigarette between her teeth while she rifles through her bag for another. “What for?”

“Thought I’d get it over with.” I flinch, recognizing the carelessness of my statement. “Uh, sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“I don’t care.” She pulls out a lighter, cups a hand around it to shield it from the wind; the shadows draw long and dark against the contours of her face. “I only give tours here, after all.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m the *worst*—”

She scoffs, blowing a billowing cloud of smoke from between her lips. “Come on,” she says, gesturing with one shoulder behind her. “I want to show you something.”

Bemused, I follow her.

We walk through a graveyard of eons gone by: dilapidated structures, crumbling rocks and weather-worn stone. She warns me to watch my step; the smooth-looking parts of the ground are ironically the most perilous. We pass up all the things I was meant to see, heading instead towards the farthest structure away: a small citadel of sorts. It only boasts two stories, one of which is open-air; and at the front of it—at the very edge of the mountainside, where it plunges into sheer cliff—a Greek flag is flown atop a mast, twisting in the wind.

“See that?” she says, pointing to the flag.

“I see it,” I confirm.

“It was taken down, once.”

“Oh?”

“World War Two, when the Germans invaded.”

“*Oh.*”

“Yeah.” She takes another pull from her cigarette, breathes it out thick and slow. “They won quickly. Immediately went about ransacking the place, putting their mark on it. Stole the golden statue of Athena from the Parthenon and took the Greek flag down to replace it with the swastika.”

“How awful.”

“But see, here’s the thing about Greeks: We’re petty.” She smirks, sends me a sideways glance. “Because that very night, two blokes snuck up to the Acropolis, scaled the flagstaff, and ripped the German’s flag right off it, putting our flag back up.”

“Did they get caught?”

“No. The absolute mad lads.” She puts her cigarette out beneath her heel. “The Germans noticed and ‘fixed it’ though, of course. But it was the sentiment, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“So, the reason I’m telling you all this:” She pauses, dramatic. “Imagine you had to do that whole hike up here—the hills, the stairs, *everything*—but the whole time you were doing it, the fucking *Nazis* were after you.”

“Yikes.”

“M’hmm. Count your blessings.” She laughs a little, under her breath. “One of them is still alive, you know.”

I blink, taken out of my thoughts. “Who?”

“The two guys who took down the flag. One of them is still alive. He’s like... a hundred.”

“Wow.”

“Yep.” She looks to the flag again, a hand against her hip. “Hasn’t had to buy his own beer for seventy-odd years, can you believe it?”

I scrounge a tour from her, after that—since she’s there and all. Venmo her some cash, along with a generous tip. She shows me where Athena’s statue used to be, where the British stole one of their columns, along with a caryatid statue—the very best one, she insists. She leads me to an olive tree, thought to be as old as the gods themselves. She asks me what I know of Alexander the Great, and I tell her that he was Macedonian; “Which is?” she prompts; “Greek,” I say, and she claps me on the back.

We sit in the shade of the pillars a moment, to take it all in.

I can feel her then looking at me, from my peripherals, but I work steadfastly to ignore it.

“You’re sad,” she says finally.

“What? No—no, no.” I swallow, grip at my pant legs. “At least... not anymore.”

She stares, a physical thing on me. “Okay,” she says, but it feels like a lie. “Okay.”

When we part ways, I don’t make plans to see her again.

ii.

It's two days of frantically cycling through sleep, with the occasional snack break forced in between. Jetlag is a vindictive bitch who jumps me the very second I'm let into my room, pressing down on me with the force of a Homeric gale storm, vengeful sea god riding at my tail and all.

I only have the wherewithal to recognize that, horrifyingly, there's a copy of *The Epigrams of Oscar Wilde* on the coffee table and turn it over so his portrait isn't staring me in the face all night before I faceplant onto the bed.

Because he has to be *patient*. His time will come.

Eventually.

It isn't until the third day that I can finally muster up the energy to crawl out from under the blankets proper. A look in the mirror confirms my worst fears of what this experience might have done to me when I spot a thick red vein pronounced in my left eye, striking across the white of it. From experience, I know it's only a matter of time before this particular feature goes away, but the sight of it is ghastly. I do my best to make sure the rest of me is not quite so offensive in the meantime, stuffing myself into a shower that's not nearly big enough for people my size and scrubbing myself of grime until I at last feel human again.

I march myself to a café for coffee after that, which helps too in this endeavor. The walk is only slightly harrowing, as Athens doesn't seem to believe in crosswalks, instead relying on its inhabitants to bait cars like matadors, weaving their way between them and ignoring the blare of horns when necessary. I try to emulate the locals, thinking they may have some advanced techniques in this, but the appropriate protocol appears only to be fast and pray ardently.

And well, I can certainly manage that.

Three stops on the subway has me at Monastiraki Square, perhaps the second most well-known part of the area. Outside the station is a bustle of energy, carts laden with fresh fruit and kiosks offering information littering the surrounding area. Restaurateurs, souvenir vendors, and the occasional tour service all compete for attention, waving and yelling, their shops decorated with eye-catching flags of every color; and in the middle of it all, the monastery stands, quiet and pallid in contrast.

The door is closed, when I approach it. In service then, I imagine. So I leave it be for now and head the opposite direction through the square, winding my way through the throngs of people who pass me, right and left.

I'm in a hurry, but I don't know why—maybe the coffee is finally hitting my system—but whatever the case, I don't notice the person trying to catch my attention until he's practically upon me: wrapping fingers around my wrist, weird and warm and foreign.

I startle, stopping in my tracks. I try to rip my hand away, but he's ensnared me well, keeping me still and smiling a smile that's far too white.

And I understand, then and there, why the fair maidens of myth I've been so ardently studying preferred to be rivers and trees to *this*.

“Where are you from?” he says, blinking cow lashes down at me. He sure is one to ask, considering his accent is thick and his skin is far too dark to be from here originally.

“America,” I say, feeling obligated.

“*America*,” he says, with reverence, tipping his head back with mirth. “You’ve come so far.”

“Yeah.” I swallow, dryly.

“Here,” he tells me, and with our hands still together, he slips one of the bracelets from around his own wrist over to mine, “you take this.” He adjusts his grip—but only to hold on to me again tighter, dropping a hand over the band: a string of wound ribbon. “With this, I hope you have no plane crashes, many babies, and a partner that treats you right.”

“Thanks...?” It’s hard to stay mad at him, admittedly, when he seems to want such nice things for me.

“Now,” he says, adjusting the bracelet so that it lays neater, “show this at the door when you come to our club tonight, all right? We play African music, and the drinks are free.”

“Oh—oh, no, I can’t.” And this time, he lets me escape when I mean to. “I don’t have any time to spare.”

His face falls, screws up a bit in upset. “You have... no time at all?”

“None,” I lie. I could probably make some if I tried; but I’m not about to tell him that.

“Hmph,” he scoffs, and then he has my wrist again, untying the bracelet from it with violent flicks of the fingers. “Then you can’t keep this—and I take back all my blessings. Every single one of them.”

I stand there, open-mouthed, as I'm stripped of the apparent "gift" and he leaves me there in the middle of the street, off to go find some other person who might be more receptive to his wheedling.

I didn't even *want* the present—or in the invite, for that matter.

But now I'm kind of pissed I don't have them.

...

Until the monastery opens, I walk the square. It is situated right in the midst of the Athenian flea market, so there's no shortage of things to look at. People sell all kinds there, from ancient coins to long tapestries, fine jewelry to sea sponges. There are pigs strung up from the rafters, fragrant soaps thick and cloying in the air. I'm plied with tea and pie at one of their shops, the former dark and pungent, the latter laden with cheese, flakey and golden. I wander a bit before I try to sit at a lone table with the pie held between my teeth but am soon shooed away like a stray cat, coming to realize I'm not allowed to make use of their seating unless I happen to buy from that particular place—which is admittedly not an all-together awful business strategy.

I turn around then, prepared to embark on my fourth or fifth lap of the area, when I realize that the monastery's doors have at last been opened.

I have to descend some stairs to enter—which is certainly a most welcome change, considering what I've come to expect from this country—but the brief journey doesn't at all prepare me for what I'm about to see.

The entire place is *gold*.

Or it at least seems to be, glittering and shining, dripping in red velvet and golden leaf. The space is small—made smaller even, by the claustrophobic arranging of furnishings all around—but the ceiling is tall and domed, endowed with murals of biblical stories and prophecy.

And in the center of it all: a crystalline chandelier, catching the minimal light from outside with each gentle sway.

I pull out my phone, to take a picture.

I'm stopped by an honest-to-god *monk*, clearing his throat and tapping at a sign taped to the front desk that I'd completely missed somehow, bearing a drawing of a camera with a great big slash upon it.

Oh, *fine*.

I slip my phone back into my front pocket, chagrined.

It's honestly impossible to study literature and not trip over the Bible, at some point. Enough classical writers reference it to practically make it required reading. It's the "hero's origin story" to end all hero's origin stories, the initial "chosen one" narrative that preceded all others'. It has it all, really: miracles and betrayal, sabotage and debauchery. Thousands of years of foreshadowing, all leading to one cataclysmic event.

And then: silence.

Or rather, more bloodshed, more arguing—more debating the nature of truth, within cloistered halls. More white men defining good and punishing evil, as they saw fit in the current moment. More people ripped from their homes, more women raped within their beds.

(More kisses exchanged under the cover of darkness.)

It had a profound effect in any case, far beyond the scope of most things that come and go on this earth.

So it's hard not to feel at least a little sense of awe, when walking forward into that place—the air choked with incense, heavy with atmosphere—and see a portrait of the savior beyond paned glass, embossed in silver and shot with gold. The image is fading, slightly, on one

side of the face, a thousand years of light having bleached it; but still one eye looks ever on, the expression neutral—carefully curated—as though it knows full well it has a voyeur.

I shudder, just a bit.

I can't read any of the inscriptions of the items—the same problem I had with the subway map, admittedly. The letters look more Russian than English in some areas, beyond the standard alpha, beta, gamma; and English isn't a common enough language here despite the tourism, so they don't bother to translate in most places.

But some things are just universal, you know?

It's a wonder they don't get robbed. One item from this tiny room could set you up for life. I've never taken anything in my life—aside from a toothbrush once, when it slipped through the wiring of my cart to the bottom rack and got smuggled out of the store without my knowledge—but even I feel my hands itching, looking at their ornate frames, their ornamental vases.

It's just as I'm mulling over an oil of Saint Nicholas that I feel a tap behind my shoulder.

“Excuse me?”

She's foreign too. British... or Australian. One or the other. She's got a complicated expression upon her face, as though not knowing the right words to say. Perhaps she hasn't yet decided if I speak English too.

“Yes?”

“Um...” If possible, she looks even more uncomfortable. “Are you aware that your backpack is open?”

“What?” I spin around, catching hold of the zipper of my bag. Sure enough, it’s wide open, from top to bottom. Even if I had left it open—which I most certainly *did not*—I would never have left it so sloppily done.

“Was something stolen?”

I swing the pack around, rifling through its contents. The only thing I have in there is a journal—for notetaking—and a few stray pens. My phone and wallet have been in my pocket this entire time, and are thus—I check—untouched.

“No,” I say, breathlessly. “Miraculously not.”

The girl smiles crookedly, indicating towards the saint with her elbow. “You should probably thank him then.”

And with that, she strolls away.

I turn back a look over my shoulder, at the unblinking eyes of Saint Nicholas where they bore down into me from the painting.

The would-be thief had wanted money, no doubt, and when they hadn’t found it, they’d graciously allowed me to keep my research notes, not knowing what was in it or if it had any potential value.

Suddenly, standing there in the middle of that little monastery, I feel just the least bit religious.

...

“I can’t drive a stick.”

The rental car guy drops keys into my hand. “What better time to learn?”

This is *asinine*.

Bad enough that it only takes one long-distance call to Triple-A to secure a temporary international driver's license; now they expect me to drive *shift*, when I've never even attempted such a thing in my life outside an arcade machine.

I sit myself down in the driver's seat regardless, crossing my arms atop steering wheel and dropping my head down upon them.

Grandma, if you're out there...

She is, though: in a small retirement community off I-5 in the rural part of Washington state. She's also the only one I've ever known to drive shift—to prefer shift, even—and I think back, obsessively, now on all those childhood car rides, trying to remember how she did it.

“It's like riding a bike,” I seem to remember her saying.

Cool, cool. No problem.

Except that I haven't ridden a bike since I broke my arm on one at age six.

“Are you all right?”

The tapping on the windshield startles me out of my loathing. “Yeah. Peachy.”

The rental guy does the bare minimum of a shrug, before shuffling back into his shop.

I grip the gear shift—

—and drive.

...

I'm killing this car.

Just absolutely murdering it. This is an unmitigated shitshow, and I'm both the opening act and grand finale, all wrapped up into one.

This poor thing deserves better. It's a cute little buggy, harkening back to the good ol' days of schoolyard martial law when you'd take any opportunity to slung someone across the arm, just because you could.

And now I'm systematically destroying all those happy memories, by straining this car to its absolute limits.

Fortunately, there isn't much traffic to impede me—or rather, force me to slow down, thereby requiring the use of the gear shift. I only have to watch the speedometer when I whip around one of the curves, hugging the side of the mountain lest I take a one-way dive into the Mediterranean. And even then, I tap the break lightly, trying to cheese it. The bug doesn't like that very much—complains both loudly and often—but I'm on a mission, and I will not be deterred, no matter the cost to the transmission.

If we lose a few good men along the way, then well, that's just life.

The Temple of Poseidon is a lot farther than I'd thought it'd been. I knew it was far—hence the rental car—but to take a full hour, cruising along the edge of the Aegean coast...

At least the view is nice.

There's a steep climb on the last leg of the trip, and the bug is actively begging me for death by the end of it. It coughs and wheezes, jerking back and forth with each change in gear. I'm so occupied trying to reason with it up the hill that I almost miss him—until he's right out in front of me, one hand extended.

“Na stamatísei!”

I slam on the break, the bug screeching to a violent halt.

It's a *cop*. A Greek cop, with a real-life, actual machine gun strapped to his chest and looking not at all pleased with me.

I roll down my window, with monumental effort.

He stalks over to the side of the car and begins ranting at me, with wild hand gestures and—not to mention—in a language I haven't even begun to understand. I only look to him, hands white-knuckling the steering wheel, with what I imagine are the world's largest eyes.

I'm going to die here. I'm going to die here, and I won't even get to know *why*.

At some point, he stops his ranting, jaw set in obvious frustration. He looks behind his shoulder—and I do as well, for the first time—and waves over another policeman, who ambles over with a much more relaxed atmosphere about him.

(Still has a gun though.)

They exchange a few sniped words, and then the other cop is sidling before the former, stooping down to look at me.

“Can't go,” he says, simply.

I blink. “What?”

“Can't go on.”

“Can't go... further?”

“Yes.” The officer points ahead, towards the path to the temple. “Event. No cars there. Park that way.” He points the opposite direction.

“But...” I try to piece it together. “Can go... to the temple?”

“Yes.” He nods, emphatically. “But no cars.”

Oh.

Okay.

I pull the shittiest U-ie Europe has ever seen, lackluster stick shift skills and all.

I have no idea why they don't want cars up there, but I'm not about to question it. I park *way* away—where I can't even see the cops anymore—and then make the rest of the trek on foot, hiking my backpack up high upon my shoulder.

I don't even attempt to make eye-contact, when I pass them by again.

There's stairs leading up to the temple, because of course there is—but not nearly as many as there were to the Acropolis, thankfully. And this temple's certainly taken cues from the tourism industry, because there's a full bar, right at the base of the final leg.

I have no reason to go in.

But I do anyway.

It's in disarray when I enter: tables pushed to the walls, crackers littering the floor. Glasses are upended, spilling their contents to the ground. It looks like the aftermath of a wicked party—especially since hardly anyone is around, except for a few stragglers, loitering on the patio.

I walk over to the bar, where a man is chiseling some ice off the window of a gelato display.

“Um, excuse me, do you know what ‘event’ is going on here?” It's the only information I have to go on, as to why I wasn't allowed to drive up to the temple.

The man looks up, through the bush of his eyebrows. “Fuck if I know,” he says, gruffly, and goes back to his ice.

Ah.

Well then.

I feel kind of obligated to buy something, after I've so clearly bothered him. But I can't read anything off the menu—and like hell will I be asking him any more questions—so I merely point out a box of juice and pay for it.

Seven euro, to be exact.

Yes, really.

Honestly. He might as well have just taken my wallet and slapped me across the face with it.

(Of course the juice tastes like liquid ambrosia, just to rub salt in the wound. But then again, anything would after the ten thousand stairs it took to get there.)

I take the juice with me, for the rest of the hike.

The sun is just beginning to set, as I set to tackle the final staircase. I can see the temple in profile, columns vaulting up, piercing into the pastel blue sky. The light dies over the edge of it, clinging to the stonework; a crescent moon looms high in the distance, soft and yellowing at the edges.

It's on the way that I discover what exactly the so-called "event" is.

It's a fashion show of some kind. Models drape themselves over marble, position themselves before pillars. They grasp at wispy fabrics—silk and chic and sheer—to make them catch at the wind and light, throwing capes and cloaks over the shoulder, drawing up the lines of dresses to show a tantalizing strip of leg. The outfits are themed around mythology, I notice: a smattering of constellations laced through the bodice here, a Grecian urn-style embroidery sewn into the collar there. And all the while, camerapeople crowd them, calling out to have them look this way or do that, whistling at them as if bidding dogs to do tricks.

I'm stopped once, halfway up, by security detail of some sort—to allow a woman with a long train to descend, her expression neutral but her fingers grasping at seams where they seem to dig into the indents at her wrists. She looks not at anyone but instead at the skyline, where the stars meet the water's edge.

The train swallows the stairs on the way down: a navy-blue shroud, sparkling in the low light, whispering against the ground with each careful step.

I wonder if she realizes cattle have been slaughtered in the name of gods, right where she stands.

There's a rock garden—if it can be called that—before the temple, where many patrons have taken to resting, watching the sun as it sets. I want to sit as well, but I also feel as though I shouldn't. This is a holy site, after all, even if most of those who practiced the religion died many years ago. Whose precious memory would I tread over? Whose spouse or sibling or friend would I not recall?

So I walk up to the temple itself and begin what I'd set out to do.

It takes a while to find it; there are a great many things scratched into the base, crowded and stifled, almost written over each other, which makes it hard to pick out any one word. But then I see it, a good way up one of the right-most columns, carved deep and with a sure hand:

Byron

Not “George Byron.” Not even “Lord Byron,” as he came to be known after a lifetime of inflated ego. Just Byron. And I would argue, not even Poet Byron, but instead, War Hero Byron, as he was later in his life, putting his money and military prowess to good use in the Greek War of Independence.

He had a, how you say, checkered past. He wasn't in Greece for fun; rather, he was chased from England after an affair with his half-sister, resulting in his wife filing for legal separation—which was particularly scandalous in the Regency era, as you can imagine. He went all over Europe after that, cavorting with the Shelleys and many a married woman—until a boating accident off the coast of Italy took out a good chunk of his friend circle. He began to focus on humanitarian efforts after that, which led him to Greece, where the country at the time was fighting all-out against the Ottoman Empire.

And somewhere along the way, he'd traveled to the Temple of Poseidon and carved his name upon the side of it, just because there was no one around to tell him he couldn't.

What an absolute tool.

But all writers are like that, at least in some way. You can't create your own characters and worlds without having at least a little bit of a god complex. The ability to put pen to paper, draw out the outline of what you see in your own head, and convince others to fill in the rest with theirs is a heady feeling, an experience more addictive than any drug. There's a narcissism there, even if the artist is ultimately more obsessed with the flower than the man.

Many things led Byron here, to where I stand: bad decisions, fate, serendipity, boredom, love. A compulsion to do what was right, a thousand micro-choices all leading to one. He died in Greece, after contracting an illness on the battlefield. Might have lived through it too, if bloodletting wasn't all the rage then. I wonder if he knew this view would be one of his last: a wide open sea, with history at his back. Was he proud of what he'd accomplished? Or did he mean to write more?

I want to feel that stone upon my fingertips, trace the lettering with my own hand. But barring hopping a fence and risking those cops from earlier making another appearance—this time being even less friendly than before—there's no good way to.

So I don't attempt it.

Instead, I turn around, stooping down to drag my finger through the sand.

My name won't last hundreds of years, like Lord Byron's. But it is here, for the time being, and that means something to someone somewhere—even if only to me.

I told you, didn't I? All writers are the same.

iii.

I'm sat on the steps of the Trilogy of Athens—one of its buildings, anyway—with two statues on either side of me: Socrates and Plato.

I'm not even sure how the Athenians know of their likeness. Some people don't even think Socrates was a real person.

(He was, but let's not let facts get in the way of a fun conspiracy theory.)

The pavement is hot under me, even in the dark. It looks no earlier than the year 399 BC behind me, but it's very much the modern era before, the street glowing neon with taillights and signals, college students smoking and giggling on the curb. There was a storm, earlier, that left the concrete wet and shiny; thunder had sounded in the distance, shaking the very eardrum. But it was gone before it'd even properly took hold. Just a warning, just a reminder.

Just in case you forgot who the chief god of Olympus is.

I take my phone out of my pocket, slide it back and forth with the base of my thumb.

Her name is Arianna—the tour guide from before, I mean. I still have her number from when I sent her money. She's probably busy—or doesn't even remember me. I wouldn't remember me.

But I open WhatsApp before I can overthink it any further.

Hey, what's a good bar that you can see the Acropolis from?

I drop the phone against my thigh, breathe in the residual cigarette smoke, looming in the air.

Not a minute later, it buzzes against my leg.

hold on i'm sending you a pin, i'm there rn

Oh, I wouldn't want to impose.

come on don;t be such a bitch baby

drink wiht me

Judging by the errors in her text, I don't think I'm a required presence for her to be able to drink. And yet—

If you insist.

I catch a ride to Plaka, the destination of the pin. It's a part of the city that was rebuilt after war and in-fighting flattened it to its foundations, so it looks very much like a movie set from the 1920s that no one ever bothered to take down. The buildings are covered in vines and flowering trees, arching over the roadway where no cars are allowed to enter; though the occasional motorcycle can and will speed by, forcing me to retreat to a narrow strip of sidewalk.

I find the correct storefront and am directed to the side, where I take five flights of stairs to the top.

“Wow, you're out of shape,” is the first thing I hear, having stopped to catch my breath on the final landing.

“Yeah,” I say, with my hands upon my knees. “Still, somehow. You'd think after being here a while, I would have gotten used to it.”

Arianna takes a deep pull from her drink, an eyebrow cocked over the rim just *so*.

She's one of the only people up there; a small group of friends lounge at the far end of the roof on patio furniture—speaking loudly in a language that is neither English nor Greek—but other than that, we're very much alone. She pats at the seat next to her, and I slide into the barstool, wordlessly.

“What do you fancy for a drink?”

“I don't know. Have any Greek specialties you'd like to turn me on to?”

“Do you like licorice?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well you're gonna like it now.” She whistles over the waitstaff and orders for me.

Just the first sip of it has me sputtering. “Good god, what *is* it?”

“Ouzo.”

“You could remove paint with this stuff.”

“I know.” She takes a drag of her cigarette—with the hand not occupied with drink—the butt of it glowing bright against the bronze of her skin. “Great, right?”

I try to throw it back like they do in the movies but only succeed in waterboarding myself, slightly. Arianna laughs as I cough, patting between my shoulders.

“You know,” she says, after a moment, “where we are right now wouldn't have been possible a few hundred years ago.”

“Oh?”

“Or rather, it would have been *illegal*.”

“Do tell.”

She points with one finger—the others cradling her drink—to the Acropolis, the whole of it turned gray in the night while the city burns around it. “For a long time, nothing was allowed

to be higher than the Parthenon. It's Athena's temple, you know? Athenians were supposed to be able to see it at all times and from every angle, so you'd always remember why the city is here and who to be grateful to for it."

"Because Athena founded it, yes?"

"That's right." Arianna respires, low and long. "But they've let up on that rule since then. Now you can build up to twelve stories—and even more sometimes, if you petition for an exception."

"You seem a bit torn up about it."

"I'm not a fan, you could say."

We lull into quiet.

She takes another smoke, chases it down with scotch. "So? Tell me why you're here."

I do—and in great detail, though it's hard. The words feel heavy on my tongue. I come to like Arianna more throughout the process though, because she doesn't talk—doesn't interrupt, I mean—only drinking intermittently and giving the occasional nod.

"I see," she says, when my rambling has at last run its course. "You're like the island of Delos."

"I'm... what now?"

"Or, ah, not the island itself." She bites at her lip, in thought. "Delos is the island where Apollo and Artemis, the god of the sun and the goddess of the moon, were said to be born. There's a temple there that was designed to cast shadows on the ground, when the light hits it certain ways throughout the day and night."

"Okay, and... what does that have to do with me?"

“Well, it’s between nine and six thousand years old and completely abandoned now, so... it’s in ruins, basically. All broken up and mangled, full of jagged edges and holes.”

“And?”

“And it still works.”

“What do you mean ‘it still works’?”

“Exactly what I said: It still works. Its initial purpose—to create shadows on the ground—still works. It just makes different shadows, now.”

“Different shadows,” I say, mostly to myself.

“M’hmm. Just because it’s different now doesn’t make it any less valuable.”

The ice adjusts, clinks in Arianna’s glass.

I hold my own drink up to my lips. “What if I don’t want to make different shadows? What if I liked my old ones?”

“Then you rebuild or you get used to it.”

I fall silent.

“In any case, I think you should keep doing this.”

“What? Bothering you?”

“No, I mean travelling. Going places and researching. Finding things out.”

“I was planning on it.”

“Good.”

I’m startled by the sound of a fiddle, a bow catching a row of strings and pulling them taut. Laughter follows, light and airy; I rise from my seat to find where the noise is coming from, leaning over the railing to look to the street below.

“It’s a wedding.”

I jump again. Arianna's followed me.

"So it is."

There's a bright white church several stories down, where the courtyard has been transformed for a wedding reception. Streamers are wrapped around the gateways and arches; people kick off their shoes upon the grass, kids holding on to their cousins' hands, lovers swaying with lovers.

A row of young men begin to form a line, all holding each other at the shoulders.

"What are they doing?" I find myself asking.

"What? You've never seen anyone dance before?" Arianna looks incredulous.

"Not like that," I clarify.

She huffs, playfully—then she's gripping me at the elbow, pulling me away from the side of the roof. "Here, I'll teach you."

I scramble in her hold, ungainly. "W-what? No, I can't—"

"Come on, it's a dance meant for drunk in-laws. It's hardly difficult." She takes up my hand and drops it onto her shoulder, where it flops there like a dead fish. "It's all in the lower half of your body, all right? Just listen to the music and follow my lead."

Even from five stories below, the fiddle reaches us, piercing through the night air. I watch Arianna, sidelong, as she brings her hips and legs forward, bending an ankle at each prolonged beat of the music in perfect time. I try to follow her, but I only end up feeling woefully inadequate. She laughs and shakes me, from where she still has my shoulder in her hand.

"Don't be so stiff! Just think of it as research! Dances tell stories too, you know?"

"Yeah?" I challenge her. "And what story is this dance telling?"

“Well, it’s telling *me* that you’re a rat bastard with two left feet and no sense of humor.”

I push her, and we break apart our chorus line, giggling like schoolgirls.

I want to claim that it’s the Ouzo—that it’s finally gotten to me—but it’s more than that, really. It’s the music, and it’s the company. It’s my past, so far removed.

It’s the shadows upon the floor.

Part II:
In Japanese,
“Anger” Is a Verb

Tokyo, Japan

i.

The airport is a liminal space.

So it feels a little as though I haven't been truly living these past twenty-three and a half hours, even though I most definitely have.

Turns out, Athens to Tokyo is not a direct flight—*ever*—unless you're royalty or some such, and even then, it's made a lot less direct when you don't want to end up spending a small fortune.

Which is how I end up getting to Tokyo via Tel Aviv and Hong Kong.

(By the end of it, I'm confident that if I have to breathe one more second of shrink-wrapped airplane anti-ventilation, I'll die. I'll just fucking *die*.)

Customs in Japan works a bit differently. They're notoriously strict, requiring you to fill out a form upon arrival and specify your exact reason for being in the country. I was advised ahead of time to claim myself a student rather than a tourist, as apparently the paperwork's easier that way.

But then I'm tripped up by something I haven't been previously briefed on.

“Me-megane.”

I turn my head, just in time to watch a mousy customs agent approach me. “Huh?” I'm stood before a camera, where I'm required to have my picture taken for Japanese immigration

records. I have my hands in the correct place upon the table—I'm sure of it—but I have been standing here an awfully long time for there to be no flash.

“Megane,” the agent says again. He pantomimes the removing of something before his eyes, fingers curled at the temple and bringing them forward.

It takes me a moment, admittedly. “Oh, *glasses*.” I scramble to remove them, feeling immediately bereft. I'm tragically nearsighted to the point of self-endangerment, so it's hard to figure out where I'm supposed to look, after that.

The agent comes around the camera, directing me with his hand. It's a white-gloved blur, behind the lens. “Kochira wo mitekudasai.”

The ending to what he says sounds similar to what I heard earlier, when our plane began to make its descent. Still, I've no idea what he's trying to convey. It's probably meant to be helpful—and unfailingly polite, of course, as the Japanese language is known to be.

A flash finally goes off, and I replace my glasses almost as quickly as I'd taken them off.

It's another airport that doesn't seem to believe in air conditioning. By the time I've located the correct area of baggage claim to collect my things, I'm pulling at my shirt collar, as well as fanning myself with some loose-leafed notes, retrieved from my back pocket.

—*emergency contacts*—

—*sensei's number*—

—*hotel information*—

I keep registering the words on each downward sweep of the arm, despite myself.

I should have had the professor meet me here, I think suddenly. Why hadn't I arranged that?

Above my head, a PA system crackles to life. It first delivers a message in quick Japanese, which I easily tune out; but the second reiteration, in English, is harder to ignore.

“Your attention, please: Baggage delivery from flight A-81, Hong Kong to Tokyo, is delayed. Luggage may be retrieved tomorrow, any time after 11:30 AM.”

Fuck.

So now I’m hot, irritable, *and* without clean clothes.

I can hear my mom’s voice in my head now, berating me for not having packed “emergency supplies” in my carry-on. But it takes up extra space—valuable space, that’s well suited for in-flight reading material—so I usually try to avoid it, at all costs.

And look where it’s gotten me.

I breathe a breath, slowly and through my nose.

Okay.

Okay.

I turn from the luggage carousel, throwing my duffle over my shoulder—
—and make a most elegant and strategic retreat.

...

Tokyo’s train system lives up the hype, even if I have a mild panic attack figuring out where to transfer at Shinjuku Station. Though to be fair, I think most people would, being confronted with a long, white, seemingly never-ending hallway of flashing red signs in a language you can’t read, nor even begin to sound out.

The droves of people passing you by on all sides don’t exactly help matters.

But I find my way to the university all right. The locals are extremely helpful in this regard; any wandering around after the fact is merely incompetence—or curiosity—on my part.

And there's usually enough English around to get me by, Roman lettering being plastered on the sides of buildings and oftentimes written in small font after its Japanese counterparts.

It's how I find the University of Tokyo, in all its clocktowered glory.

The place is all Victorian-era brown brick stone—after, of course, a bright red torii gate at the entrance reminds you of where you are. Travelling through the arch, you're greeted by what is essentially a small city, as well as a park and a pond lined with yellowed trees, indicative of the season. Bicycles lie against the sides of benches and along footpaths, unchained and laden with books; students mill about upon the manicured grass. In a lot of ways, it's just like every other university I've ever seen; and that makes me feel at ease, somehow.

I go up to the school's directory, to locate their humanities building.

Inside looks more hotel than university. There's a lobby bearing a cool-toned, monochromatic color scheme, complete with vaulting ceilings and clustered lounge chairs. I pass the information desk to find a hallway hosting no less than ten elevators and take one to the appropriate floor. The trilling voice of a young Japanese woman accompanies me from the speakers, alerting me to each level we pass by.

“Ichi-kai~! Ni-kai~! San-kai~!”

The doors open, before the literature department's offices.

Mukashi-sensei is a friend of a friend. He and one of my former professors went to school together and stayed in touch throughout the years. When word got around that one of my destinations would be Tokyo, my teacher forwarded me his information, claiming he could prove to be a valuable asset.

Considering he's an esteemed professor of Japanese literature at one of the largest and most prestigious universities in all of Tokyo, I'd say all signs point to yes.

I knock on the frame of his door, as it's slightly ajar.

“Hai, douzo.”

It's a closet of an office, which is to be expected. A college's penchant to stretch out the budget is pretty universal, even halfway around the world. But the room is made even more cramped by an abundance of books—not only on the bookshelf but scattered along the desk and littering the floor as well. Some of the stacks come about waist high, even; they could act well as armrests, if the professor so chose to use them in such a way.

I feel even *more* at home.

“Professor Mukashi?”

“Correct.” His accent is soft, like the lines etched upon his skin. He's holding thick-rimmed reading glasses between the tartan folds of a cleaning cloth. “You're who Janice sent along to me, yes?”

“That's right.” I gesture to a seat across from him, and he waves his hand, accommodatingly.

He begins excavating an electric kettle out of a pile of well-worn books, even before he's asked me if I want anything to drink. “How was your flight?”

“*Flights*,” I correct, exasperated. “And awful, like they always are.”

He nods, standing from his chair. “Excuse me one moment.” He leaves and returns, the kettle now full. “Now then,” he says, settling it into its base, “tell me: What's brought you here?”

I tell him—but in far less detail, compared to the last time I spilled my life story. As good of a recommendation as Mukashi-sensei came with, he's still a veritable stranger, and I'm in no hurry to sully my reputation with him before I've even begun to construct it.

He sits back and listens, with his hands folded atop the apex of his stomach.

“Well,” he says when I’m done. It’s more of placeholder than a preamble. “Well.” He thinks, behind the glare of his glasses, and rocks his chair back and forth with the ball of his foot. “I don’t really know where to begin with that, so instead... let’s take it one day at a time.” He leans forward, plucks the kettle off its platform and pours me a cup. “What would you like to do today then?”

I groan. “God, I don’t know. Nothing, preferably.” I’d learned that lesson well in Greece: Don’t go full force the first day. Time change can and will kick you in the teeth.

Mukashi-sensei hums, the beginnings of a wry smile pulling at his lips. “Then *I* have an idea—that is, if you’re taking suggestions.”

“Please.”

We drink our tea in relative silence. Then he takes up his coat from the back of his chair and ushers me out into the hallway.

I follow—mostly because I have no earthly idea what else to do, and he isn’t giving me any clues.

We take the elevator down, exit the building, and go out through the quad. It’s quieter now. Most of the students from before have tucked themselves away in little nooks and crannies, as there’s a wind picking up, shuffling the leaves underfoot. The pond ripples a brilliant emerald; moss trembles, tumbles upon its surface.

We leave campus all together, the professor before me, leading the charge, while I trail a few steps behind. He cuts an imposing figure like this, hands thrust into the pockets of his trench. Strikes me as the kind of guy that enjoys reading Sherlock Holmes in his free time—though I’m in no position to pass judgement upon anyone, obviously.

Let thee without sin cast the first stone.

“Where are we going?” I ask finally. It feels like an exercise in futility, considering I’ve already followed him thus far, but the strap of my bag is starting to dig in at my shoulder, leaving an angry red mark.

“Almost there,” is all he says, not even turning to look at me. I huff surreptitiously, smothering it into the crux of my palm.

Then it at last begins to come into view.

“Ueno Park,” I breathe.

It’s the wrong time of year to see cherry blossoms, but the park is immaculate, even so. The trees are still green, and the ponds, lily-padded. A centuries-old temple is nestled within the heart of sprawling, modern museums, coffeeshops, and kiosks; and a wide road cuts through the center of it all, guiding people through.

“So you’re familiar with it,” Mukashi-sensei surmises.

“Of course,” I say. For thousands of years, artists and writers of all kinds have made their pilgrimages here, to sit upon its bridges and benches and grass-knolled thickets, to run their brushes through ink and let the aesthetic of their surroundings fill them with passion.

“Good.” The professor brings me further in, finds a spot overlooking the water and lays his coat down. He settles into a position upon his legs, feet tucked underneath him. “We’re going to write haiku.”

“*Haiku?*” It comes out far more forceful than I intend it.

“Yes. You do know what a haiku is, yes?”

Of course I do. I just haven’t done one since the third-grade, at a cultural festival. Didn’t exactly turn out well, back then, as I wasn’t overly familiar with the concept of a syllable, much

less how to count multiple of them; and obviously my tiny mind couldn't possibly comprehend a country or culture outside of my own. But I had scribbled down a few at least, for fun—and for praise, for any recognition I could get.

Probably the wrong way to go about making art, now that I think about it.

At the face I must be making, Mukashi-sensei takes out a pen and paper. “I’ll write some too. So come, sit.”

I do, if only to get that accursed weight off my back.

It’s admittedly hard to focus, with all the stimuli around. There are hordes of people passing us by, paddle boats shredding the lake beside us. Ducks peck at the ground, flapping their wings; leaves fall from their branches, only to be swept away by the wind.

“Breathe,” Sensei says.

I close my eyes, to do just that.

It smells clean. Crisp. Not at all like a big city should. There’s ringing far off, from the bell off a child’s bike. Water churns, sloshes in place. I can feel the sun, pressing into my skin.

“Good,” Sensei says, soft. “Now write.”

It’s hard, but I do it. The words come one at a time, stuttered, brusque. I try to sound impressive at first—to appeal to the professor—but one look at my first attempts has him biting at the inside of his cheek, displeased.

“Try again.”

And well, I think, feeling unreasonably offended at this, ask and you shall receive.

Fucking Delta Air

Next time you lose my luggage

You’ll lose my number

Sensei looks over my shoulder and laughs. “Better! Much better.”

How?

But I roll with it.

Greek food was all right

But for real, might never eat

Souflaki again

Why the hell do I

Buy so many books? It's key-

chains next time for sure

Yes, I count on my

Fingers to write haiku; can't

Be good at it all

“I think you’re doing a fine job,” Sensei says.

I groan, collapsing backwards onto the grass. I push my duffle up, to cushion my head.

“And what about you?” I ask, turning to my side. “Got anything to share?”

“Mm,” he hums. He takes up his paper, shakes it a little to even it out. “Yuki ga furu /
Yama de konban ni, ashi / ato wo mitanai.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s snowing / on the mountain tonight, no / footprints to be seen.”

“Wow. That’s beautiful.”

“They’re lyrics from Disney’s *Frozen*.”

I bark out a laugh, so ugly in my unpreparedness for it. “I *love it*.”

Sensei grins, wide and dimpled, and sets a hand to his lower back, rolling out a cramp. “Watched it the other day with my granddaughter. Can’t get that damn song out of my head.” He shakes himself, as though to loosen the thought. “It’s not as good as yours though. The second line has eight syllables, not seven, because I can’t separate the ‘a’ from the ‘shi’ in ‘ashi,’ for foot.”

I look to where his finger indicates, the character indeed singular. It’s separated by the rest of the second line by the Japanese equivalent of a comma, though still surrounded by those long, sure strokes, cutting across the page:

雪が降る
山で今晚に、足
跡を見たくない

“I disagree,” I say. “Even if it doesn’t fit the proper format, it’s still pleasant to look at.”

“You only say that because it looks foreign to you,” Sensei laughs.

I feel a wrinkle forming in my brow. “No, really—”

The professor waves away my protest. “Keep writing.”

I don’t though. I stay on my side, with a hand curled beside my head to watch Sensei as he writes. He looks at me every so often—from the corner of his eye—but doesn’t say anything more. Just lets his hand hover above his paper, dragging his pen as though it’s a brush, characters coming into being with the same consistency of the tides coming in, spilling across the page.

It’s soothing, in a wholly predictable way. Like listening to crickets chirp outside the window of your childhood home.

“Konbanwa,” Sensei says to me, sometime later. I’m blinking my eyes open, to a landscape that’s beginning to grow dark. “That means ‘good evening,’ by the way.”

“Was I sleeping?” I feel the need to ask, as I have all the patent characteristics of a person who just took an accidental nap—sore neck, blurred vision, an overall feeling of disgust with oneself—but none of the feeling of rest that I should have gleaned from such an event.

The professor laughs. “Yes. Nodded right off.”

“You should have woke me.”

“Rest is good for you.”

“Can’t be *that* good, if I still wake up like this,” I say, with a hint of bitterness infiltrating my tone.

The professor considers this, privately. “Well,” he says, and there’s a sense of finality to it. “Perhaps we should return to this exercise another time?”

“Perhaps.”

Ueno is a dull hum around us now. Mukashi-sensei helps me up with calloused hands, the pages of his haiku held between his teeth. I wonder if he’ll keep them; I wonder if he’ll throw them away.

There’s no question where mine will be going, in any case.

ii.

My mouth feels like sandpaper the next morning. I couldn't brush my teeth, with my suitcase being lost somewhere to the void. I'm wearing the same clothes from yesterday too, still travel-worn and smelling of airplane exhaust.

But it's just as I'm staring up at the hotel ceiling from my bed, contemplating the merits of a shower without my comb or razor, that I see it:

The light fixture is moving.

Just a little, at first. Shaking, like it's cold. But then it really begins to sway, the cords hanging off it undulating, like a great, big jellyfish, swimming up to the surface.

I glance out the window.

And all at once, I feel drunk.

Earthquake.

I haven't experienced one since childhood. But the way the building reels is unmistakable, the structure of it buckling and yielding in so that it doesn't break altogether.

I trip out from under my covers.

No good; the table is too short to fit someone of my stature. I look around, manic, for another option and find one in the doorway—if you can call it that—to the bathroom. It's only a

rice paper screen that rolls along a track, but it's as good as I'm going to get, so I shuffle under it, taking one side of it in both hands, for leverage.

It's probably less than a minute but feels much longer, me gripping that to screen for dear life, the hotel shaking, contorting beneath my feet. But the earth finally settles into its new form like an old man into a much-loved recliner, and the ground stops in its grumbling, the building soon following suit.

For a while, I still stand in the doorway, unsure of what to do with myself. Do I call my parents? Tell them I'm all right? Is this the kind of incident that requires one of those Facebook check-ins, like a hurricane or Comic-Con?

Carefully, as though I don't trust the ground now, I toe across the floor to pick up my laptop from the bedside table.

5.8. The earthquake was a 5.8 on the Richter scale—which is just enough to feel it and then some but not really enough to brag about living through it, either.

So basically, it's like it never happened.

...

No one seems to have noticed the earthquake—either that, or they don't care. It's business as usual in the hotel lobby, as well as out on the street and boarding the train. I keep looking for signs of paranoia on people's faces, hints of concern or fear. But there's nothing. The commuters keep on commuting; the world keeps on turning. There are even mothers out with strollers, walking their babies down sidewalks where the earth beneath them was cracking and hissing, bending under seismic, cataclysmic pressure, not a mere half hour ago.

And well, if they can act like nothing's happened, then so can I.

I get a text from my brother, while riding the train.

how's the research going?

Oh, swell, I reply, pointedly not bending my head down too low to get a whiff from the inside of my shirt.

where are you now?

Tokyo.

yeah, but where in Tokyo?

Uh—

I look up, read the next stop from the train's digital display as it slides left to right, just above the doors. *Yotsuya.*

that means nothing to me

I don't understand what you want from me.

why're ya biting my head off?

I don't know. Why are you berating me with nonsense?

whoa

you're A Lot right now, you know that?

you need to take a nap

I just slept.

you need to sleep again

And frustratingly, I recognize this statement as fact.

I have work to do.

you've got plenty of time

No, I don't.

a month

That's not unlimited time.

you're being ridiculous

And just as I go to write a response, he adds, *pedantic*, in what I know to be a self-righteous and vitriolic tone.

He knows full-well that I hate when he uses my words against me.

I'm halfway through writing a scathing reply that I'll most probably regret when I get another message notification—from Twitter this time, of all places.

昔先生 @sushimukashi

Are you awake?

October 5, 2019, 8:49 AM

Regrettably.

October 5, 2019, 8:50 AM

Come to the imperial palace then.

Or well, not TO it.

In front of it.

October 5, 2019, 8:52 AM

Have more homework for me?

October 5, 2019, 8:53 AM

More of a thought exercise.

October 5, 2019, 8:55 AM

Consider me there.

October 5, 2019, 8:56 AM

And I get off at Shinjuku to transfer.

...

“Ohayou!” Mukashi-sensei greets, as I stroll across a long stretch of path to meet him.

“That means ‘good morning,’ by the way.”

“I got that from context clues, thanks,” I say, a bit curt. It’s barely nine-thirty, but the rays from the sun are hot against my neck and shoulders. I’m regretting not telling the professor to wait, so that I could have at least collected my things from the airport first. “Why did you want me to come here?”

Sensei turns, points up the hill. “That’s the imperial palace, over there.”

I resist reminding him that he told me to meet him here, specifically. “Yes.”

“Did you know Tokyo wasn’t always the capital of Japan?”

“I did know.” I remember it from somewhere: a shadow of a glimmer of a memory, lurking deep in my subconscious from some class long ago.

Sensei laughs. “What don’t you know?”

This baffles me. I know next to nothing, as far as I’m concerned. So I only shrug, wordlessly.

This seems to satisfy the professor. “The capital used to be in Kyoto—and for a long time too. It’s still there, but the royal family lives here now.”

I wait for him to continue.

“But the court is what inspired it: *The Tale of Genji*.”

Ah.

The first novel. Written by a woman, a lady-in-waiting to the empress a thousand-odd years ago, derived from gossip of the time.

“Have you read it?” I ask. It’s a behemoth of a book.

Sensei laughs again, but more muted this time. “I had to, for my doctorate.”

I try not to wince.

There are just some things friends don’t let friends read.

(Or at least make them get an audio book for.)

“I take it you haven’t then?”

“No.” I’d tried, back in high school. My distaste for lengthy paragraphs was fervent, even then, and made the experience a miserable one. It was the same aversion that had me chucking *Heart of Darkness* against a wall, years later.

(Well, that, and all the obvious racism.)

“It was written in what’s known as ‘orihon’-style, which is when pieces of paper are pasted together in such a way that they unfold like an accordion. So if you think the book is long, imagine how long the original manuscript is, all laid out in a continuous line.”

That time I do wince.

“Where did she find the patience?” I think I say it to myself, but it comes out, whispered.

“There wasn’t a lot to do in eleventh century.” And it’s a good point. “But that’s why I wanted you to come here: to think about that.”

“Think about what?”

“What about that—” Sensei points again to the palace. “—inspired so much?”

I blink at the castle on the hill, bright white and looming. “May I have a few minutes to formulate an answer?”

The sensei chuckles. “Of course.”

I pace away, the crunch of gravel underfoot. There’s a small park across the way, where I find a bench to sit upon. It’s flanked by a vending machine that somehow has *ice cream* as a product to choose from.

Oh, Japan.

The imperial palace doesn’t look very large from here. Truthfully, even from close up—or as close as civilians are allowed to get, anyway—it doesn’t look big, either. Maybe it’s the angle. But from where I’m sitting, it’s barely a white dot upon the hill. It’s maybe two floors. Three, at the very most.

I try to imagine life in there. Royalty walks those halls, descendants of people who are said to have the blood of gods running through their veins. Now they’re only a few steps up from how the British view their own royals in the eyes of most, but the prestige remains, somehow. They still have a secret police—a “household agency,” as they refer to it—known as the “kunaicho,” which guards both their secrets and their lives, heavily. They’re still looked up to as role models and leaders, trendsetters and teachers.

They’re still *there*, thousands of years out.

But I think of it from the other side too. I think of looking out from there—from atop that hill—onto the city of Tokyo, a million bodies moving from place to place, cars and buses and trains intersecting, coexisting in perfect harmony. I think of the lurid neon signs of ramen shops and the trucks that circle around with J-pop spilling from their speakers and the warm glow from the Rainbow Bridge refracting off the frigid waters of the Tokyo Bay.

And they can’t see any of it, like I can.

“Well? Have you come to some epiphany?”

Mukashi-sensei settles down beside me, with a soft grunt.

“Mm,” I consider. “Perhaps.”

“Would you like to share?”

I stuff my hands in my pockets, leaning against the back of the bench. “I think...” I tilt my head up, towards the sky. The branches of large trees cordon it off, into pieces. “I think perhaps she knew it both ways.”

The professor looks a bit lost at this.

“Murasaki Shikibu, I mean,” I clarify. “She... She was a lady-in-waiting to the empress, but she was a civilian first—an extremely wealthy one, of course, with access and privilege which made her writing career possible. But she still lived on the outside, once.”

Sensei blinks, slowly. He turns from me, resting his hands against his stomach. “Art *is* directly correlated with disposable income in most cases, yes. But I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“I mean that Murasaki had the chance to live in there—” I point to the castle. “—and most people didn’t. But because she did, she was able to describe the experience to others.”

Sensei considers this. “An outsider’s perspective from within...”

“Exactly.”

“Is that what you want to do?” He meets my eyes again. “Describe an experience unique to you, in so that other people can understand it?”

All at once, I feel completely transparent. “Uh, I mean, that—that wouldn’t be an altogether *awful* outcome.”

“But not your main objective?”

“Well—” I run a hand through the sweat that’s accumulated on the back of my neck. “—there’s... another thing too. Maybe...” I feel myself receding, burying into allegory, slipping into allusion. “Maybe she—Murasaki—wanted other people of the court to read her work too. Maybe she wanted them to relate and see themselves in it and get... I don’t know... catharsis? Schadenfreude?”

“Atonement? Exoneration?”

“No, it’s—” I grasp for something yet unattainable.

Sensei thinks, with fingers drumming against the base of his belly. “You know,” he says, “the most popular genre of books is self-help.”

I laugh—so suddenly I almost choke. “That’s something my dad says.”

“Well I am a dad,” Sensei says, heartily. “But it’s true. People want to be helped. They want to know they’re not alone in their experiences.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because—” He leans forward, on the bench. “—I think, deep down, what you really want to do... is write a self-help book.”

I’m quiet, for a moment. “A self-help book for one.”

“A self-help book for one,” he parrots.

And all around us, the heart of Tokyo beats on.

...

“Excuse me!”

I halt in my trudge across the lobby, recovered luggage dragged behind me crudely in my wake. “Yes?”

A receptionist waves me closer, to the desk. It's almost taller than I am, and that's saying something. "Ah, um, you—we, uh—" She stutters, from on high. Then she ducks—disappearing completely—and pops back up with a wastepaper basket, held loosely from her fingers. "You... Housekeeping went to clean your room, and well... You threw this away?" She says it like a question.

I lean forward, nearly on the tips of my toes.

There, in the bin, are some papers I'd ripped from my journal: the haiku from yesterday, as well as some scattered notes and the beginning to a story I found no potential in.

My face grows hot, under the receptionist's concerned countenance.

But aside from the humiliation—which is baffling, all on its own—there's something else there too. Something else that has me flustered, coloring in the cheeks.

She cares.

(Or someone in this hotel does, anyway.)

"Was it a mistake?" She looks so hopeful I could cry.

"Y-yeah," I lie. I hold out my hand for the basket. "Yeah, my mistake. Thank you so much."

It's worth it, just to see her smile. "We're happy to help!"

I tuck the bin under my arm and take up my suitcase again, with one hand. I wait until I'm on the other side of the elevator doors to release a breath, just on the side of too shaky.

Don't you dare fuckin' cry over literal garbage.

But I do. Of course I do.

(And the scraps get safely tucked back into the confines of my notebook, once more.)

iii.

I expect Meiji Shrine to be right there in front of me, when I get off the train at Harajuku.

It's not.

But Takeshita Street is.

It's the part of Harajuku most people are familiar with: the fashion capital of Tokyo, a long strip of dress shops and crêpe stands, storefronts offering cotton candy the size of a person's head and pet shops with literal doggies-in-the-window.

So paradise, basically.

It's raining lightly when I arrive, so my first purchase becomes a navy blue umbrella, with little white kittens walking along the rim. Opening it up under the awning, I give it a small twirl, just to watch the cats fly by, marching one by one around me to a soundless beat.

The street itself a little kid's dreams come true. Most everything is bathed in bubblegum pink and fashioned with balloons, sweets being sold around every corner. The people here aside from the obvious tourists dress accordingly, decked out in frills and gussied up with lace. There's a lot of mismatched patterned socks, unnecessary Band-Aids pasted to cheeks and over knees.

Which makes me wildly undressed, by comparison.

I get a coffee and a crêpe, in that order. The coffee is embellished with a milk-foam heart; the crêpe is banana-cream and chocolate. I eat both on a balcony overlooking the street, legs dangling off the edge. With space so limited and highly prized, they've built up instead of out, and the shops run high, towering over the walkway.

From here, I can almost see it: Meiji Shrine. Or I can at least see the forest it's sequestered in, a tiny island of green bobbing in a skyscrapered sea.

I shake my hands of crumbs, crumple up my crêpe wrapper and place my coffee cup back onto its flower-patterned tray.

Takeshita shrinks behind me as I go out to do what I'd meant to originally, following that bird's-eye view all the way to the torii gate that marks the path to the shrine.

This one's far larger than the one at the university—and far older too. It's brown instead of red—I wonder, idly, if it had ever been red—and easily forty feet high, with the seal of the imperial family upon it no less than three times, embossed across the head in gold.

Sensei told me it had to be big, for the gods to be able to pass through.

Past the entrance is a gravel road, wide as the gate is long. It's flanked by the trees of Yoyogi Park, as well as barrels of sake which the shrine makes, sells, and even uses for some purpose or another. They sit nestled against the path, stacked on top of one another, cobwebbed and unyielding.

And beyond that: the shrine itself.

The first thing I come upon is a shack of sorts, with a basin of running water underneath. The shrine maiden there helpfully instructs me to wash my hands in it, as well as take some of it into my mouth and spit it onto the ground. To "purify" me, apparently. I do it, even though I

feel silly the whole time. Then she directs me to the little storefront on the other side of the road, informing me I can get a fortune there, if I so please.

And why the hell not?

There, I'm handed a bamboo cup with many sticks inside and told to pick one. I do: It has the number thirteen scratched into the side of it, which immediately has me feeling uneasy. But the shrine maiden in charge of the fortunes only laughs when I confide in her about this, assuring me that thirteen is not an unlucky number in Japanese. "Now if you had gotten four or seven, then you'd have a right to be worried!" she says. So I unravel the paper she hands to me with a little less trepidation, in exchange for the stick.

And I can't read any of it.

"Um—" I hold up the fortune, trying to convey my inadequacy upon my face rather than admitting it aloud.

She laughs at me again and takes the paper back.

But the corners of her mouth begin to curve downwards, as she reads.

"Is it bad...?"

"Ah... It's not *good*." She turns the paper to me, pointing to the top. "'Medium luck.' It means that you will struggle, but it will all turn out fine in the end."

"You're sure?" I'm suddenly struck with paranoia, suspecting she might be sugarcoating it in a bid to spare my feelings.

"I'm positive." She returns the fortune to me—only to bring forth boxes of multicolored charms. "But you should get an omamori! Just in case!"

Ah, a sales pitch.

(I still buy one though, because I'm not about to tempt fate.)

I pick out a black one, with a white-gold accent sewn to the front.

“For *victory*,” she says, carefully pronouncing the word. She folds it into my hand, like a treasure. “For success in academics, sports, and all other endeavors.”

Sounds like it was made with high schoolers in mind, truthfully—but I like the design, so I refuse to trade it.

The maiden tells me I have to carry it on my person always, or the blessing won’t work, so I end up tying it to my keys.

Little risk of me forgetting it, there.

I check my watch. The ceremony is supposed to start at four, so I meander a bit, taking the whole thing in. The grounds are simple, as expected; the temple was built a hundred years ago, then *rebuilt*, again, after World War Two wreaked havoc on it. So it’s all fairly practical. Neat and orderly. Utilitarian, even. Not a single grain of sand is out of place.

So I take pause when I see a priest standing beside the guide map, as though lost.

I stop in front of him, but he doesn’t take notice; his attention is elsewhere, on the forest around us.

“Do you…” I start, weakly, “… need any help?”

He startles a bit, arms jumping from beneath his white uniform. “No.” He doesn’t elaborate—like I’d hoped he would—and I can’t tell yet if it’s from a lack of English-speaking skills or just a general disinterest in me.

So I decide to take a guess: “Are you… new here?”

He unfolds a wooden fan, waving it before his face. “What gave it away?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Mm.” He eyes me, thoughtfully. “What brings you here?”

God, where do I *start*? “Ah, it’s... complicated.”

“Hm.” He folds his fan, unfolds it again. Doesn’t end up pushing the issue further, though I can tell he wants to.

“And what brings *you* here?” I ask.

He tilts his head up, heavenwards. “Kami.”

“What?”

“The gods.”

“*Jesus*.”

“No, not that one.”

I choke down what’s probably some blasphemous laughter. “Well then,” I say, clearing my throat, “what gods is this temple dedicated to anyway?”

He looks at me, sideways. “Emperor Meiji, of course—and Empress Shoken as well.”

“Wait, like... a real emperor? A real emperor and empress?”

“That’s right.”

“They’re gods?”

“They were made gods, after their death. Anything can be deified, be it human, animal, or object.”

I think back, to when I’d visited Shibuya Crossing. A statue of a dog had stood proudly at the entrance of the train station, ears pointed forward and ever-alert. I had been told he was the guardian of Shibuya Station; I just didn’t realize until now how literal the locals had meant it.

“Oh.”

“Mm.” The priest speaks, from behind his fan. “But I’m just passing through. Most come here for training at some point or other, as this is the largest shrine in the country.”

“I see.” My brain is admittedly firing a little slowly, still trying to process the information that anything could be a god: the grass I walk on, the rock I kick, the calico cat who trots through my hotel lobby every morning, as though to make its rounds. “So... do you like it? Working at a shrine, I mean?”

He considers, eyes narrowed at something beyond. “Everyone serves their own gods, in one way or another. They all worship at the altar of a person or a career or a hobby or an experience. I simply do it more obviously.”

I find I have nothing to say, to that.

“You’ll want to head inside, if you want to catch the ceremony.”

I check my watch. He’s right of course, though I have no idea how he knows, without a timepiece to consult.

“Thanks,” I say, and I make my way into the temple without another word.

...

“Mina-san!” a shrine maiden bellows from before us. She’s pulling deep from the diaphragm, to summon a lower tone of voice that fills up every inch of the room. “I present to you: the pride of our shrine. Observe, and be enlightened, by our kagura dance!”

From somewhere behind us, the melancholic whistling of a flute pierces the air. It sounds out of tune—if a flutes can be such—and struggles to maintain a note before it trips rather than shifts into the next. A drum accompanies it, beat only at certain intervals along with the twanging of a bell, from far off.

Two maidens stand upon the stage, with a fan in one hand a small cluster of their own bells in the other. The bells are attached to a stick for easy maneuvering—much like a baby’s

rattle—and used accordingly, brought forward and back, shaken to generate a soft clattering of peals as they knock against each other.

Though they only do so on certain occasions, the maidens moving as though they have ten volumes of the encyclopedia balanced upon their heads. And perhaps they do, in the metaphorical sense, because they're brandishing golden headpieces that look liable to fall at any over-enthused sway or intake of breath.

By the end of it, I'm breathless myself.

They sit—on their legs, like I have been made to—and bow, as the flute holds its final note, wavering in pitch. The audience—me, as well as a mixed company of other foreigners—begin to clap, tentative in our uncertainty in knowing if it's the right thing to do, culturally.

The maiden from before takes the stage again, with her booming voice. “Yes, gaikokujin, you may clap! Loud noises let the kami know we are pleased!”

We clap a little louder, after that.

I unfold myself from upon the tatami mat, trying to kick the feeling back into my legs. We file out of the room, handed a nearly flat bowl of sake on our way out.

It's sweet. Clear, like morning dew.

But my discomfort begins almost immediately, after coming out into the sunshine.

“Excuse me, is there a bathroom here?”

The shrine maiden I pulled aside shakes her head, looking at me with pity. “No public restrooms here. Closest is Harajuku Station.”

Great.

I don't actually have to go to the bathroom, which is a blessing. It's just that my legs still feel strange—prickly, and not at all in a manner I'm familiar with. I want to take off my pants, to see if there's anything obviously wrong.

But I don't think the proprietors of the shrine would like it very much, if I were to start stripping out in the open.

Might not jive with the spiritual mood they're going for.

It's a wretched walk to Harajuku, my legs protesting with every step made forward. They especially ache where my thighs touch, screaming in agony with each and every stride. By the end of it, I'm waddling like I'm seventeen and a half months pregnant, if only to temper the pain even the smallest bit.

I thrust my pants down gracelessly, when I finally find a bathroom stall.

There are welts all over my thighs, red and angry and splotchy. Hives, I recognize them as. They itch like a motherfucker, but touching them at all sends a zip of pain through the nerves like nothing else.

I think back on what could have caused this, methodically sifting through every step of my day. It's not a reaction I've seen on myself in years—not since I had guinea pigs as a child and learned I was allergic to hay.

Hay—

Hey.

Wait.

I drag a hand down my leg, leaving a five-fingered red mark against the skin.

Tatami is hay.

I'm allergic to hay.

Therefore, I'm allergic to tatami.

Descartes, eat your heart out.

I yank my pants up and gather my things, hoping, resignedly, that Japanese urgent care won't be wholly, entirely miserable.

I don't tell Sensei I'm doing it. I hardly let *myself* know I'm doing it. Just google the Japanese word for "short" and the nearest salon.

"Mijikai," I say to the hairdresser, gesturing with my hand to just a bit below my ears.

I haven't gotten my hair cut professionally in over a year. Just took scissors to it, whenever it fell into my eyes. The energy just wasn't there—but now it is, and it's *manic*, snuffling and rutting, kicking its legs out like a wild beast.

I watch the hair fall around my feet, tucked against the chair one on top of the other.

Snip. A strand. *Snip.* Another strand.

My head feels almost weightless, by the end of it.

"Oh, you look different," Mukashi-sensei says, when I approach him in the garden behind Asakusa. He's leaning forward with his hands folded against the barrier of a stone bridge, looking out over the water.

"Yeah." I come up next to him, fiddling with a lock of hair from where it curls against the dome of my cheek. "Just felt like it was time for a change."

He nods, as if this was merely an eventuality. "Did it make you feel better?"

I open my mouth to reach for the automatic answer—that being “yes, of course”—but realize halfway through it’s not entirely accurate. The end result is me gaping like a fish, like the flashes of orange koi circling beneath our feet.

The professor chuckles at this. “Perhaps it’s too soon to tell.”

Perhaps it is.

We walk into Asakusa proper, and it feels a little like going back in time. A temple towers over a large open-air market, selling the likes of kimono, geta sandals, and the more traditional Japanese foods like takoyaki and mochi. Three-colored odango lie out, skewered, atop pearlescent plates; art pieces à la ukiyo-e are leant against the outsides of buildings, to entice the occasional passerby.

Kanzashi hair pins adorn wigs, their charms gleaming against both blonde and brunette.

I feel the back of my own head at this last one, feeling a bit bereaved.

“This is what they would have seen,” Mukashi-sensei says; and before I can even get a chance to ask him to elaborate, he adds, “Natsume Souseki, Edogawa Ranpo...”

“But not Murakami Haruki,” I tease.

Sensei chuckles. “He would probably *like* to see it like this, everywhere. But considering he’s still alive, he’ll have to make due with places like this.”

I nod and turn around again, to look at the scenery.

The market grows dark, as evening settles in; red lanterns are set alight before every stall. When the crowd begins to swell, Sensei takes one of my sleeves in hand and directs me out of the fray: across the way to where the Sumida River runs thick and wild.

He sits down, by the water.

I follow suit, even though it’s murder on the knees.

“I was thinking,” he starts, reaching into his inside coat pocket, “that it’s a shame you didn’t come here during the summer, for festival season. You would have liked Tanabata, I think.”

“Yeah.” I think I would have: a festival centered around literal star-crossed lovers, only allowed to meet once a year. I’m told the streets are wreathed in streamers, then—that the lights run bright, and the shaved ice, cold and sugary-sweet.

“But I thought,” Sensei continues, “that I could bring a little festival cheer to you, even though it’s nearly winter.” He brings out his hand at last, bearing two sticks, lightly coated in a flammable resin.

I take one from him, reverently.

“They’re called ‘senkouhanabi’ here. I’m not sure what they call it in English.”

“Sparklers,” I provide, turning it over in my fingers.

Sensei nods, pulling out a lighter. “Care to start it?”

He starts mine first; then I tip my stick into his, setting the other ablaze. They burn yellow-gold against the backdrop of the river, spilling sparkles out onto the street. I watch as the fire licks up the stick, stamping stars on the back of my eyelids with every other blink.

When it at last stops—fizzles out—I feel as though it’s over, somehow.

Like it’s all over.

“Don’t look so sad,” Sensei says, softly. “If it was beautiful once, it can be beautiful again.”

I scrub at my eyes, with a rough hand. “And how do you know?”

“Because the fireworks return, every year. Even flowers wilt between their blooms.”

I inhale a haggard breath.

Sensei's hand finds my shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. "You'll come back, like the cherry blossoms do in spring. And everyone will come out to see it, to see just how wonderful you are."

And I wither against him, like a flower.

Part III:
More Than You Bargained for
in America

New York City, New York

United States of America

i.

“Oh,” I say. “Oh *no*.”

It’s snowing. It’s snowing, and my very limited wardrobe—which has thus far gotten me through Greece and Japan, both of which are fairly to moderately tropical—is not at all equipped for the likes of *this*: a bonafide, genuine New England-style blizzard.

Luckily, I don’t have to stand out in the cold for long.

“Hey!”

A beat-up Subaru comes to a skidding halt before the airport loading zone; my cousin’s girlfriend leans out the half-rolled down passenger-side window, pushing sunglasses up from her eyes to the top of her head. “Nice weather, right?”

“It’s great,” I deadpan, rapping my knuckles against the car until one of them pops the trunk. I get my luggage in as quickly as possible, in so that I’ll be able to get into the car myself.

I’m rubbing my hands together, breathing into them when I slide into the back.

Landon flips the blinker on, seamlessly weaving us into New York City traffic. “Glad you made it,” he says. “I know how much you hate flying.”

“Yeah.” I run my fingers down my jeans, trying to rub some warmth back into them.

Kate whips her head around, from the front. “Wait, you don’t like to fly? Then why are you doing this whole crazy trip in the first place?”

Good question, I think.

(And it’s not that I don’t *like* to fly.

It’s that I’m fucking terrified of it.)

“I think it’s an exercise in self-flagellation at this point,” I mutter, mostly to myself.

Kate laughs, like it’s a joke. “Well, you’re probably glad to be in the good ol’ U-S-of-A, right?”

I make a non-committal noise.

You’d think customs would be a lot easier, coming back into your own country, but no, that’s where you’d be wrong. It’s just as much of a pain in the ass, if not more.

And if there’s one thing you hate to deal with when you’re jet-lagged six ways to Sunday, it’s being questioned on whether or not you’ve spontaneously become a terrorist over the course of your bizarre multi-continental spirit journey.

“Are you gonna fall asleep?” Landon asks, glancing into the rear-view mirror. Admittedly, my head is beginning to lean towards the window, though the frigid temperature emanating off it keeps me from falling all the way.

“Don’t fall asleep yet!” Kate says. “We have a surprise for you back home.”

“Oh,” I say, blinking blearily. “Okay.”

I stay awake.

But just barely.

Landon and Kate’s apartment is a two-bedroom, from when they were just roommates rather than romantically involved. But everything has slowly come to migrate down the hall, one

item at a time: a toothbrush here, a stray scarf there. Now Landon's room is practically stripped bare, aside from the bedclothes and a few errant posters. So I dump all my things into that room, hardly paying attention to where they end up. It's about all I can muster, given the state I'm in.

But then I walk back out into the living room and find all the lights to be out.

"Uh... guys?"

"Happy birthday to you~" the two sing. They walk out from the kitchen: Kate with a tiny German chocolate cake on a platter, the candle from it illuminating her face; Landon just behind her, brandishing a shit-eating grin. "Happy birthday to you~"

Oh god.

They finish the song, much to my chagrin. Kate hands the cake over to me, with an expectant look.

"But—" I try. "But it's not my birthday until tomorrow."

"Then we'll stay up all night and sing it to you again!" Kate insists.

"Yeah, we'll even get another cake," Landon adds. "Can't have too much cake, right?"

The dessert grows watery and distorted, in front of my eyes.

"Aww, don't," Landon starts, but he side-hugs me regardless; I wrap an arm around him, hiding my face in his neck.

I think Kate takes the cake from me, so it doesn't topple from its tray.

"So?" Kate says, much later when we all have chocolate crumbs all over our faces.

"What did you wish for?"

"Um..."

Landon rolls his eyes, from beside me on the couch. "'Can't tell,' right? Or the wish won't come true?"

I laugh, disjointedly. “Yeah, that’s right.”

What I don’t tell them, I think, as I crawl into my cousin’s twin bed later that night and pull the covers up, is that I hadn’t wished for anything at all, in that moment.

That I’d been entirely content, for once.

ii.

Landon, Kate, and I stand on the curb outside the *New York Times* building, just...
looking at it. Just taking it all in.

“And *why* are we here?” Landon asks. He’s shuffling his feet a bit, restlessly, in a back and forth motion. Snow clings to his boots, where they catch at the edge of the sidewalk.

I shrug. “Wanted to see it.”

“It’s just an old building.”

“It’s not old. It was only built in 2007.”

“How do you know these things?” Kate says wondrously. She blows air into her mitten-clad fingers.

I don’t really feel like elaborating on the state of my brain at the moment, of which had kept me up the night before in a whirlwind combination of jet-lag, inconsistent caffeine intake, and insomnia; so I merely hum, like I’m indifferent about the whole thing rather than a complete dumpster fire of a person with little to no impulse control when it comes to falling down a Wikipedia hole at three AM.

“Doesn’t look all that special,” I say, not-so-subtly trying to steer the conversation back to the building before us.

And it really doesn't. Aside from being large and embossed across the front in that famous font, it's a fairly plain structure. Though admittedly, it's hard to be impressed by anything when I'd only a few days ago gazed at the Tokyo Skytree, in all its two thousand-foot tall glory.

(Still. You'd think the *New York Times* of all things would at least splurge for some decent blinds.)

"Why would it be special?" Landon asks.

"Because news is written in there," I say, like it's obvious.

"Yeah? And?"

"*All* the news."

Kate's nose wrinkles with a bit of laughter. "You're weird."

"I just..." A flush creeps up my neck, from under my borrowed scarf. "I just thought it might have some... aura about it. So much important information comes out of this building. The sinking of the Titanic, the "Pentagon Papers," freedom of the press, 9/11, the Harvey Weinstein debacle—"

Kate hisses like an alley cat, at that last one.

"You know what I mean."

"We do, we do," Landon appeases me. "But you're in *New York* of all places. So let's ditch this dumb, old building and actually do some cool stuff."

"I told you, it's not *old*—"

But Kate hooks me around the elbow regardless, pulling me away and effectively smothering the rest of my protest.

We go shopping, because that's what New Yorkers do—or at least, that's what people who have come to New York with tragically inadequate wardrobes do. We peer through shop windows, Kate and Landon at the helm while I follow a few paces behind. As I'm entirely helpless in the fashion department, Kate plays the role of personal stylist, dragging me into the likes of Saks and Bloomingdale's, all manner of stores I can't afford to even *look at*, let alone shop in. But Kate insists, if only for the experience. I think I'll be safe when we take a hard detour into Macy's, but because it's *the* Macy's, I find I'm no more out of the woods than I was before. In the end, I limit my purchases to a coat, gloves, knit hat with accompanying headband, and some appropriate-weather footwear.

It doesn't at all seem like it's worth the price until I shuffle back out into the snow and feel *warm*, of all things.

Then it's worth every goddamn penny.

“Good work today, champ.” Kate claps me on the back, as we walk.

I flinch. “I... didn't do anything...?” I think, anyway.

“You most certainly did,” Kate insists. “This was research. Rеееееsearch.”

“Um—?”

“God, did *The Devil Wears Prada* teach you *nothing*? Fashion is art, and art is storytelling! It's all *cyclical*.”

I mean... kinda. Sorta. If you squint at it.

But it makes me feel suddenly much more accomplished, so I decide to generously allow it.

Then we eat food like New Yorkers: spaghetti from hole-in-the-wall Italian places, soup from Jewish matzah ball shops, cheesecakes and kebabs and chili dogs dripping from the bun. I

feel like I may have to buy another coat after it all, in a bigger size; but Kate and Landon just laugh at me when I tell them this.

“But you’ve gotten so skinny already!”

Have I...? I glance into a store window, as we stride past; it’s a bit hard to gage bundled up for the weather as I am, but I suppose they’re not wrong. I’ve been eating inconsistently, walking when and where I can to save on train and cab fare. Seems fair to assume it’s had some impact on my appearance, even if I personally haven’t noticed.

(Not to mention: the previous year. Hard to stay motivated to stuff sustenance down your gullet, when you want no part in being sustained.)

When we’re finally through with our cuisine crawl, Landon and Kate walk me to Broadway—but no further.

“Sure you don’t want us to come too?” Kate asks.

I thrust my hands into my coat pockets. Feel some of those little packets of sand factories put in new things no one actually knows what to do with. “Uh... no, that’s all right. I kind of feel like... this is something I should do on my own.”

She shrugs. “Well, all right.”

“Let us know when you’re heading back,” says Landon.

I assure them I will, watch them disappear as they go underground through the subway entrance.

Then I head inside the building.

It’s sleek and corporate. Impersonal. I hunch my shoulders as the security guard studies me, hawkishly, from a mahogany desk across the lobby. The message is clear: I don’t appear as though I belong here.

And I can't even say he's wrong, in that assertion.

I ride the elevator up eleven floors. The glass on one side has me queasy—or rather, even queasier than I was before. I grip the railing for dear life, though I know it's merely a matter of being able to see through the wall, that I was always going to be this high regardless and only put forth worry about it now because I can actually see what's going on.

Then again—

This is Spider-man's view, I think, unbidden, and there's a bit of comfort with the thought. Everything's so small from up here; worries shrink under the distance, minimized to pinprick objects under my feet.

Still doesn't stop me from sprinting off the elevator when the double-doors finally open, of course, but it's a nice sentiment.

If the company has a receptionist, they've abandoned their post for the moment. So I slide past the entry, walking along the corridor to read names off the plates posted at each door.

It's nearly the end of the hall that I finally come across the one I am looking for.

They're hunched over their computer screen when I find them: legs pulled to the chest, toes curled over the edge of their armchair. Yes, they're missing shoes—but not socks, which are patterned but mismatched, the left not at all complementing the right. They've got a look of intense concentration about them then, fingers stroking at their face in an absentminded kind of way.

Some vindictive part of me deep down inside revels in what I'm about to do.

“Terry!”

“Jesus—” They bungle their keyboard, of which was lying overtop across their knees.

“What the hell—?”

I lean against their doorframe, cross my arms over my chest and wait for my presence to properly register.

When at last it does, Terry's eyes go narrow. "*You*. You fuckin' asshole! How dare you? Showing up in my office unannounced—"

"Surprise," I say, waving my hands sarcastically.

"I'll kill you. They'll never find the body—"

"How rude."

"*Rude?* You wanna talk rude? I haven't heard from you in fourteen goddamn months! And then you decide to suddenly drop by on me like you're the ghost of fuckin' Christmas past or something?"

Immediately my playful nature retreats, at the unwelcome reminder. "Ah, um... yeah. Sorry about that." I grip at the side of my arm, sheepishly.

Terry settles back into the chair, setting their keyboard aside as well as, ostensibly, their ire. "Why are you even here, anyway?"

Why indeed? Terry is not the person that I need to talk to; Theo, my editor, is the one who has been leaving me voicemails non-stop since even before the beginning of the trip. Terry, my agent, had tried once—count it: *once*—to cajole some writing out of me, then promptly quit when they found it fruitless.

But that hadn't meant they had stopped talking to me altogether. We've been exchanging emails and texts off and on since then, even if they're not all of the literary variety. There didn't seem to be any hard feelings, in any case.

So this felt more like stopping in on a friend, rather than a business associate.

“Nu-uh,” Terry says, when I go to move forward like I’m about to give them a hug. They hold out a hand, expectantly. “First give me the goods.”

I roll my eyes, but I give them up all the same.

I slide my phone into their hand, already open to the photo album where I meticulously store and sort all the pictures I take of my cat.

“M’hm,” Terry says while they swipe through the photos, like they’re surveying a manuscript rather than a big, orange bastard who regularly screams at me for food. “M’hm, yes, very good.” They look up at me, with the most grave of expressions. “Not to be overdramatic, but I would take a bullet for him.”

“I know.”

“*God*,” Terry says. “What a magnificent creature.”

Terry lives in an apartment building with a strict no-pet policy, so they’ve come to live vicariously through me—which suits me just fine. Better to be known as “the one with the cat” rather than “washed-up writer,” I think.

“All right, I’ve had my fill.” Terry hands me back my phone. They fold their hands before them, setting their chin on the knuckles. “Now sit down, you crazy bastard. Tell me how you got here.”

I do, and I tell them. It’s the easiest recounting yet, in how comfortable I feel in their presence. Terry makes affirming noises every once in a while but otherwise says very little, working to take it all in. They do fidget though: twiddle and twitch. They’ve got boney fingers, with a slight callous on the fourth finger, right hand where their pen rests. They unfold and fold their hands many times, by the end of it.

And when I at last lull into silence, they just... let it happen. Let it hang there, in suspension.

“All right,” Terry says finally, reaching behind them to the back of their chair for their coat. “We’re going out.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Don’t you have work?”

“Work schmerk. I have something to show you.”

And helplessly, I follow them out.

Terry calls for an Uber, when we’re out on the curb. We pile into it when it comes, cross legs and drum fingers until the car drops us off ten minutes later where Terry indicated to them.

I groan, upon stepping out.

Somehow, I’m at another park.

“Don’t you pull that tone of voice with me,” Terry snaps. I can tell it’s meant to be mostly playful, but with the novelty of the awkward tension between us, I nearly jump out of my skin at the reprimand.

Terry either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“Buckle up, buttercup,” they say, charging ahead. “We’re in for a bit of a walk.”

I watch the back of their ponytail sway, with every step taken forward. It’s low on their neck, a bronze-black from when they had dyed it blonde a while ago, then left it to the elements. It’s neat though, complements well the suit-look they have going on, even if I know under their loafers the socks are rainbow and kitten-themed.

But deep down, aren’t all our collective metaphorical socks in disarray?

Central Park is never *quiet*, really, but it is peaceful, for the moment. The trees are larger than they were at Ueno—and denser too. It feels as though I could get lost in here, which is not a feeling I'm used to equating with a park. The snow is mostly clear on the path, but ice chips still occasionally crunch underneath of the sole of my shoe, creating a deafening sound.

When we cross a bridge, the water is a looking glass below us, splotches of Van Gogh-esque yellows and blues reflected from the skyscrapers above.

At last we slow until we stop, in the middle of a wide open road.

Terry is still—until they turn and point, at a statue to the side. “Who’s that?”

“Uh—”

“It’s Sir Walter Scott.”

“Could have given me a second—”

“And that?” They point down the way.

“How could I—?”

“Robert Burns.”

“Okay...?”

“And that?”

“Shakespeare.”

“Lucky guess. And the one over there?”

“Come on, Terry, this isn’t fair—”

“Christopher Columbus.”

“Wow, non-sequitur much?”

“He’s not important. Just thought I’d let you know.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Yeah, that’s the *point*.” They bring their gloved hands together, rubbing heat into the leather. “You aren’t where these guys are yet. What do you think would have happened, if they had given up? Do you think their statues would be here, for thousands of people to pass by on the daily?”

I feel the skin at bridge of my nose darken, from much more than just the inclement weather. “I don’t care whether I’m known—”

“Well too bad, ‘cause that isn’t for you to decide.” Terry wrings out their fingers, one by one. “Writers write because they *have to*. Because the universe compels them. You can try to fight it; you can try to be stubborn. But the compulsion will always be there, just underneath the surface.”

I swallow, with much effort. “And what if I don’t believe in that? Destiny or fate or... what have you.”

“I’m not telling you to believe in the supernatural,” Terry says. “I’m telling you to believe in *yourself*.”

The snow begins to fall around us then, in soft, delicate flakes.

I shuffle up next to Terry, to get a better look at the statue before us. “You always did like a ‘sir,’ didn’t you?”

They chuckle: a white puff of air at the shirt collar. “You got me. Named myself after one, after all.”

I nod, slowly. I turn to them, sling an arm over their shoulders. “Wanna get out of here and warm up at a coffee shop?”

“Yes,” Terry breathes. “God, you have no idea. I’m freezin’ my tits off here.”

“I thought they were already off?”

“Haha, very *funny*—” They reach down to scoop up some ice, spill it down the back of my coat. I shriek, drawing the eyes of everyone around. But they’re New Yorkers and not easily perturbed, so they go back to their business soon enough, not paying any more attention to the two grown adults, wrestling in the snow.

iii.

I look at myself before the mirror: turn this way and that, all the way around to look at the back. I'm wearing a tailcoat and suspenders, bowtie with accompanying pocket square. There's a dangly pearl necklace around my neck, as well as a stacked heel to my shoes, which could not be any more gratuitous.

I wonder if the top hat is even necessary, considering all I have going on.

"Oh, you look great!" Kate edges into the bathroom alongside me, working to get around in the limited space. She reaches for a ruby-red lipstick upon the counter and begins to apply it generously to her face. "Would you like me to do you too?" she asks, on a downward motion of the hand that pulls at her lower lip.

"No, thanks."

"All right." She puckers her lips, with an audible pop. "We're leaving in five minutes, so make sure you've got your things."

Five minutes could range anywhere from ten minutes to twelve business days, for Landon and Kate, but I don't say that—or anything, for that matter. Just smile and nod, going out from the bathroom to find a place upon the couch and settling in.

We clock in at fifteen minutes late, by the time we pull up to the old red brick-stone townhouse.

There's thumping music coming from within, strobe lights blinking in the windows upstairs. But the man at the door takes our coats like a gentleman, dressed to the nines just like the rest of us.

"Welcome to West Egg," he says, winking as though we wouldn't otherwise catch on to the act. "Alcohol's in the kitchen, dancing's up above. Feel free to peruse the back garden as well, if you fancy a walk on the wild side."

I truly do not want to know—now or ever—what exactly he means by that.

But Kate merely says thanks, dumping her faux-fur stole onto him.

I follow behind Landon and try most ardently not to grab for his hand.

It's a Broadway production afterparty, cast and crew only. Well... cast and crew and *me* only. But I was made to be an exception, as I'm cousins with a member of the lighting crew and almost-cousins-in-law with one of their singers. They—Landon and Kate—both look perfectly at home here, downing Jell-O shots as soon as they're presented to them. I gather part of it must be because they know everybody—or at least *recognize* everybody. But I am a stranger here, a crow flying in the shadow of an eagle, so I'm more cautious, twitchier. And I dislike Jell-O—drunk or sober—so I decline the offer, when the server comes around to me.

I do snag a red cup of Cosmopolitan though, out a large serving bowl.

It's salty as all hell.

Landon gestures to me, indicating to the stairs. I follow him and Kate up, the bass traveling through the floorboards, vibrating into my legs.

On the second floor, a large space has been opened up, all the furniture pushed to the walls. People dance in the center, both in the 1920s style and modern; the music seems to be on a similar page, sharing a line between the two eras in a way that's almost seamless. Landon

elbows me, raising his voice to be heard over the music: “I’m gonna ask Kate if she wants to dance, all right?”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding as well in case the message wasn’t clear. “Go have fun.”

They make their way into the fray, while I stay on the peripherals.

There’s alcohol served up here too; a small self-serve drink cart is adjacent to the floor, loaded with bottles of all types: tequila, vodka, schnapps and gin. I take whatever’s clear and sugary, mixing it with the god-awful concoction I have already to make it at least a little more palatable.

I drink it down, just as “Low” by Flo Rida transitions into an old-fashioned jazz beat.

“Whoa, easy there, tiger,” someone says.

I almost choke, on the last swallow. “What—?”

A mafioso-looking type sidles up to me: pinstriped suit, fedora, and all. He’s affecting a Brooklyn accent that’s so campy it’s practically pitching a tent. “You’ve got all night, don’t ya? How ‘bout leavin’ some of the drinks to the rest of us, eh?”

I stare at him, blankly.

He breaks character, after a solid minute. “I’m just messing with you,” he says finally.

“No need to look so severe.”

I fill up my cup again. “I don’t appreciate it.”

“Well then, allow me to make it up to you.” He only lets me finish half my beverage before he hooks me by the arm, taking me out to the dance floor.

“What are you—?” But he’s got me in a classic stance, as though we’re about to waltz.

“I’m going to teach you a routine,” he says. “I *am* the choreographer around here, after all.”

“I can’t dance—”

“Not *yet*.” He releases my hands, positions himself in so that his legs are overlapping, one in front of the other. “Just do what I do.”

Perhaps it’s the social setting; perhaps it’s the booze. But I do as he says, putting my arms to my sides in a mirror image of him.

“Okay, now one foot forward, one foot back—” He demonstrates. “—and hands in, hands out. Then move them at the same time, alternating.”

I do so: slow and stiff but technically correct.

“Good, good. Now faster. Put some energy into it.”

He shows me again. The movement is electric current down his arms and legs—all bold lines and jagged edges—but precise like a pen stroke, tight and deft and exceedingly skillful. I try to follow, but it feels like a facsimile, like a mere imitation of a masterwork.

But he only says, “Yeah, yeah, you’re getting there,” in an encouraging manner. He guides my hands, with his own. “Put the shoulders in there. Don’t be afraid to get crazy!”

I look down at myself, where he holds me. My skin is lit up blue and yellow, pink and green. I have never felt more my own voyeur. “Are you... teaching me The Charleston?”

“Oh, so you recognize it.” He laughs. “Yeah. I mean, this *is* a Gatsby party, after all.”

I wrinkle my nose at him, still keeping up with the movements. “So... you *do* know that? Then why are you dressed like you’re part of the mob?”

“What are you talking about? I’m Nick Carraway!” He releases my hands, to strike a pose.

I'm shocked out of my dancing, by the sound of my own snort. "You are *not* Nick Carraway. Nick Carraway is... Well quite frankly, he's a nerd. You need a bowtie or a boater or... *something*."

"Oh?" The guy sways a bit to the music, like he simply can't help himself. "And what makes you such an authority?"

"My master's degree?"

"Ooh, *fancy*."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Look, we all took high school English. All I'm saying is, you don't have to be such a bitch about it."

I turn and leave him there, blocking my ears to the sounds of his protests.

...

I'm drunk. I'm fucking drunk, and it's all *his* fault.

(I ignore the niggling voice in the back of my head that says I would have gotten drunk, regardless.)

I made myself scarce after *the incident*, determined to quietly drown away my sorrows. But I get lonely after a while and stalk the party like a skeevy cat, scanning the faces in the crowd for Kate and Landon.

I finally find them, on the second floor. The space where the dancing was held has mostly fizzled out now, to chilled conversation; people loiter under the lights and chat as though the bass isn't still pumping on. Landon and Kate talk in the center, being sociable, making people laugh. They've got drinks in their hands, but they don't seem nearly as sloshed as I am.

Though it's admittedly hard to gage something like that, from the outside.

“Hey, it’s my cousin!” Landon flags me down, with a wave. “Over here! I was just talking about you.”

I internally groan.

He slings his arm around me, when I approach. “Guys, this is who I was talking about! You know, the famous author!”

Immediately my tongue shrivels up in my mouth.

“I’m—” I choke. “I’m not—”

“Wrote a book in high school and two more in college! Can you believe that?”

“Landon—”

“Book signing tours, best sellers lists—”

“S-stop—”

“A real savant, you know?”

“Landon?” Kate’s voice wavers.

He whips his head around to her. “What? What’d I say?”

But then I spot him, on the edge of the pack:

The choreographer.

I break from the crowd: splinter, like a shard of glass. There’s lights—there’s *sounds*—and they’re all on me, clawing at my skin: bass and the color red and the pounding of my feet in patent leather. The stairs run endless below me; I knock my ankle into the side of the wall—pain, pain, *pain*—but it’s *bright*, and it’s *good*, and I want more of it. I want to dunk my head under water, until the bubbles stop receding from my lips.

I pull open a sliding backdoor—*screech, whine, whine*—and then I'm out in the air, the scent of grass cloying even under a layer of frost. I fall to my knees upon the lawn, sinking my fingers into the snow until I can't feel them anymore.

I want to die, I want to die, I want to die—

These are intrusive thoughts; remember what Darcy said.

FUCK WHAT DARCY SAID

But she—

I WANT TO SLIT MY OWN THROAT

You don't mean that—

NO, I DO

I FUCKING MEAN IT THIS TIME

*PUSSY-ASS, YOU CAN'T EVEN HAVE A BUTTER KNIFE POINTED IN YOUR
DIRECTION WITHOUT FEELING UNCOMFORTABLE*

IS THIS HOW YOU WANT TO LIVE?

IN CONSTANT FEAR?

YOU HATE YOURSELF, DON'T YOU?

YOU HATE THIS PERSON

I don't hate anybody.

YOU FUCKING COWARD

YOU'LL NEVER BE GOOD ENOUGH

WHY DO YOU EVEN BOTHER TRYING?

I was good, once.

WERE YOU REALLY? OR WERE YOU JUST DELUDING YOURSELF?

No... People liked me.

People still like me.

THEY PRETEND

THEY ALL PRETEND

YOU'VE FOOLED THEM

*FOOLED THEM INTO THINKING YOU HAVE TALENT, THAT YOU'RE A GOOD
PERSON*

THEY DON'T KNOW THE REAL YOU

THEY'D HATE THE REAL YOU

They can't all be wrong.

THEY CAN

THEY ARE

THEY WANT YOU DEAD TOO

No... That's not true.

YOU

WANT

TO—

“Oh, thank god!”

Kate hurries over to me, in a whirlwind of silver and gold. Her flapper dress is being whipped around in the wind; when she kneels to join me on the ground, it rips right at the knee.

“Show me your hands,” she says urgently, already reaching out for them.

I curl in upon myself. “N-no—”

She pulls them out of the snow without my permission; they're crimson, with the blood that's rushed to them. "Come on," she says, "let's get you inside—"

"No."

It's cold out here—I can *breathe* out here—and I'm not about to move. Ever, if possible—but I'll settle with just for now.

Kate seems to realize that, from my tone. "All right." She adjusts herself, in so that she's sitting down properly. "Then we'll stay here." She folds her hands upon her lap.

We're quiet, for a long time.

"You should go in," I tell her after a while. I hate how quiet my voice is, but I couldn't raise it now if my life depended on it. "You'll get sick."

"So will you," Kate says stubbornly.

"No, I—" But I will.

But I also don't care.

Looking around the backyard, I now know what the doorman meant by the "wild side." It's just the place to smoke: cigarettes, vapes, now-legal pot. Kate catches me looking at them a touch too long and scooches towards me, on the ground.

"Do you want me to ask if they'll share? It might calm you down."

"Nah." Bad lungs run in my family; I never thought it worth the risk to sample the devil's lettuce.

She settles in again: a mother hen upon her nest. "Okay."

"Oh, shit, there you are!" Landon yanks open the slider, coming over to kneel upon the lawn. "Hey, what happened back there?"

I wish I knew. I wish it was *simple*. All I know is that I'm drunk and pathetic and mentally ill—or I was, once—and everyone should hate me, but maybe they don't? The muscles in my neck suddenly feel weak, soft like wet tissue paper. My head lolls forward; my shoulders hunch, fingers curling again into the snow. "I think..." I make a noise I've never made before, from all the way in the back of my throat. "I think I might be sick...?" I'm not sure yet, haven't decided.

"Shit, uh, okay—" Landon pats my back, lightly. "I mean, you're outside, so... just let it all out, if you want."

That's all the permission I need to start croaking like a frog, emptying my stomach of all its recent contents. I love Landon exceedingly, for not running away from me then.

"Yeah, yeah, just lie down." I don't know I'm endeavoring to do so until Kate pushes me all the way forward, so that I'm on my side upon the grass. "Just relax for a while." She strokes at my side, in tiny circles.

It's not an attractive view. My own vomit is in the way, for one, and the ground is ice cold. I push my arm under my head to bolster it—which does help, a little—but it's still not great. One out of five stars, definitely. Would not recommend.

But I'm tired and weak, so I take it all in.

The door is still ajar, from when Landon came out. Someone's playing piano in the front room: Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'." People are singing karaoke to it, slurred and not caring of how they sound. It feels so far away, lying down like this. As though it's coming from a whole different world entirely.

There are blue roses on the kitchen table, tied in a tight bouquet and stuck in a vase.

"Not real..."

“What?” Kate looks at me with such concern that I immediately feel I may be sick again.

“The roses,” I’m quick to clarify. I gesture with my shoulder, inside. “Blue roses don’t exist in nature. Those must be fake.”

“Oh.” She seems relieved. “Yes... Or, uh, you don’t say?”

“Yeah.” It’s dumb. *I’m* dumb. But I keep rambling, because that’s the kind of drunk I am: “You know what blue roses mean in flower language? Unobtainable love. You know... because they’re not real.”

“That’s clever,” Kate says, distant. She’s moved to rubbing my arm now, absentmindedly.

“Oh, I get it now.” Landon unfolds his legs from before him, resting his arms at the elbows above the knees. “Because in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay never truly gets to be with Daisy. He dies at the end.”

“*Spoilers*,” Kate says, teasingly.

“Well, it’s true!”

“No yelling,” I say, from the ground. “It’s my birthday, and I say no yelling.”

Kate laughs. “It was your birthday two weeks ago!”

“Then it’s my birthday *month*. And I say no yelling.”

“Okay.” Kate flicks some hair out of my face. “Whatever you say.”

For a while, there’s only the sound of low chatter and the piano, playing on.

“Do you guys... like me?” I say it so soft, it feels liable to disappear to the wind.

“What?” Landon jerks his head around quick enough to give him whiplash. “Of course I like you! You’re *family*.”

“Yeah, but like... if I was a stranger. Would you still like me?”

Landon gives it some thought—or at least pretends to. “I mean, we definitely have different interests, but I think we’d get along fine.”

“Promise?”

“Yeah.”

“What if I wasn’t a writer? Would you like me still, even then?”

Landon’s brows furrow, wrinkling in the middle. “Dude, I’ve known you since we were in *diapers*. We took baths together! Wasn’t exactly like you were writing Shakespeare back then, and I liked you plenty.”

I roll my eyes to Kate, still hovering above me. “And you? Do you like me?”

She stares at me, for a long while. “Do you really think I’d be sitting here on the ground in below freezing weather if I didn’t?”

Well.

That answers that.

“And next to my puke,” I remind her.

She makes a face. “Ugh, don’t remind me.”

I roll over all the way: onto my back now. “Can’t see any stars.”

“Welcome to New York,” Landon says.

“Do you miss them?”

“Sometimes. I miss... nature, sometimes. Just being around it.”

I scoop up a collection from the ground beside me—blades of grass, chunks of snow, some gravel—and set it next to him. “Here you go.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No problem, bro.”

“Did you hurt yourself back there?” Kate asks suddenly.

I immediately clam up.

“No, I—”

“‘Cause I heard a bang, like you knocked yourself into a wall when you were running down the stairs.”

Oh.

That kind of hurt.

“Uh... yeah.” I lift my leg, rolling the ankle. “Just caught the side of my foot. Probably will have a bruise... No big deal though.”

She looks at it, sideways. “Yeah... seems all right. There’s a red mark, but it’s not swollen or anything.”

“If it is,” Landon chimes in, “we have plenty of ice.”

“Wow, thanks,” I say.

“Happy to help.”

For a moment, I simply watch a cloud of smoke as it hangs in the air.

“Stars tell stories, you know?” I say, to the sky. “It’s almost like... the stories are all gone, here.”

“That’s sad,” Kate says.

“I guess the stories are just down below,” says Landon.

“Yeah...” I lift a hand, into the air. “Help me up?”

The pair do. Kate fusses over me a little when I stumble, but I assure her it’s nothing serious—just residual drunkenness, as well as the ache in my ankle. I take a shoulder from each of them in hand, allowing them to steady my steps back inside.

They help me into a chair at the kitchen table, beside those staunch blue roses.

“You guys can keep enjoying yourselves,” I say. “I’ll, uh... wait it out or something. Maybe get a ride home.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kate says, grabbing herself at the waist. “No way we’re letting you just go off to mope by yourself.”

I color—or more so than I had been before, from drinking. “Really, you don’t have to—”

“Nah, fuck it.” Landon goes to the front room, snatches our coats from out of the closet. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Not a half hour later, we’re on the couch, covered by a collective blanket. There’s tea and coffee in mugs, steaming upon the table. We’re watching an early 2000s sitcom I’ve never watched before but Kate and Landon insist is a classic.

Outside the window, the stars are dim in the sky.

Because for now, all the stories worth telling are down here.

iv.

“Fuck, uh—” I stop, in the dead center of the sidewalk. “Um, maybe we should go back—”

“Aww, come on!” Kate grabs my arm and drags me again forward. “You’re the one who wanted to do this!”

That I was.

I’ve always had a mind to get a tattoo. The aesthetic is nice, first of all; but aside from that, I enjoy the idea of etching art into the skin: a masterpiece, forever a part of you.

It’s the prospective pain, though, that worries me.

I’m drawn into the tattoo shop, a little bell from on top of the door tinkling as we enter.

Friendly, I think.

“Hi, we’re here for the two-thirty appointment...?”

“Yeah, okay,” says the receptionist. “I’ll tell Bianca’s team you’re here.”

Bianca. That’s a nice name. A not-stabbing-me-too-hard-with-a-thousand-tiny-needles name.

Kate has gotten a tattoo before: a light white one on the inside of her wrist, so her dad won't be able to easily see it and kill her over it. Landon's never gotten one, but he's wanted to for years: something "silly," he said.

I would like one with a little more meaning, personally.

I sit in the waiting room with one leg—the "Prozac leg," as I affectionally refer to it—bouncing a hole into the floorboards. Once Kate puts her hand over my knee and it stops, for a moment, but then starts right up again, when she removes it.

Landon takes a magazine from the side table and smacks me across the arm with it, playfully. "Don't be such a wuss!"

"Yeah." I swallow.

Kate looks at me, with sudden concern. "If you really don't want to—"

"No, I do, I *do*." That's the frustrating part.

"Okay," she says. "Then we'll all do it together."

I don't remember getting called back. I don't remember following Bianca—a woman with platinum white-blonde hair and a butterfly tattoo upon the neck—downstairs, to the studio. I don't remember hyperventilating into the bathroom mirror, slapping my face with water, and telling myself that no matter what that throughout this process I *cannot move*.

I can't remember any of that, really.

Bianca straps my foot down, as though she's about to draw blood from it—and to be honest, that's exactly what she's doing, in actuality. But she has an easy laugh and sparkling sapphire eyes, so I work to relax my muscles, under her touch.

She sets to shaving my ankle, where the tattoo will go.

“Don’t worry,” she says as she works. “Everyone’s nervous for the first one, but after that, you’ll want a billion more. It’s like the floodgates open.”

“O-oh, is that right?” I jump, when she rests a manicured hand against my calf.

“M’hm.” She doesn’t look at me. Just works, diligently.

I laugh: a shrill thing. “Has anybody ever fainted while you gave them a tattoo?”

“Not yet.” She glances up, from where she’s pulling on disposable gloves. “Be interesting though, for you to be the first. Then I’d have a great story to tell.”

I don’t know what to expect, when she sets the gun against my skin.

Turns out, not much.

Oh, not that it isn’t painful because it *is*—especially right at the start—but the needle is there and gone again so quickly, the stabbing almost doesn’t register. It’s like the nerves are shot, inundated under wave after wave: a cacophony of feeling, a symphony of sensation.

After a minute or so, I can hardly feel it at all.

“I’m shaking,” I say, for lack of anything better to say. It may just be the vibrating of the gun on me, but I suspect it must be more.

“That’s why I tied you down,” says Bianca, pointedly. She’s also got a vice grip on my foot, squeezing the skin a ghostly white. I don’t think she’s aware she’s doing it at all.

My tattoo is small—as I’d expected to be a baby about it, if not tap out altogether—so Bianca finishes up in a mere half hour, wiping down the piece with a strip of cloth as she stows the gun away. “Whelp, you’re all done.”

I look down at it, wonderingly.

“So what’cha think?”

It’s exactly how I’d described it in the email: a book with its pages fluttering open, a

veritable galaxy spilling from the spine. Little stars twinkle from within, stark against the splashes of purples and blues.

I want to look at it *forever*.

“It’s fantastic,” I finally force from my mouth, to not offend Bianca further with my silence.

“Good.” She rifles through the side table, retrieving some medical gaze. “I’m going to wrap it up now, okay?”

“W-wait,” I say. “I want to show my cousin and his girlfriend. They’re the people I came in with.”

“Well, I need to wrap it, to keep it from getting contaminated. But you can take a picture of it before I do, if you’d like.”

I struggle to get my phone from my pocket, lying down with my ankle still strapped to the chair.

It even looks good in *pictures*.

I book it across the salon, shoving my phone into Landon and Kate’s faces while they get their own respective tattoos done. They very much agree with my assessment: It’s a masterpiece. It feels weird to be proud of it, considering I did absolutely zero percent of the work to obtain it, but I still am, somehow. It’s on *me*. It’s on me—forever, now—and it’s good, so that must mean *I’m* good—or at least a part of me is—because how could something so beautiful not make me at least a little bit beautiful too?

When they’re finished as well, we all walk out of the shop together, linked at the elbows.

“Well that was fun!” Kate says.

“Yeah.” Landon checks his watch, lifting up my arm along with his own. “But we’ve really gotta hurry, if we’re to make the show.”

My leg throbs a little, as we sprint after a taxi.

The theater is resplendent, when we’re finally ushered in. It’s all deep reds and golds, with a domed ceiling that feels as high as the heavens themselves. I think of the voices that can fill this space and feel my chest expand, with an undefinable presence: the weight of human potential, art and life so intertwined the differences are minuscule.

We sit on the balcony and wait, with playbills clutched between our fingers.

They have already seen this before, Landon and Kate—probably many times, I figure. But they claim it never gets dull, so they’re here with me now, to experience it again.

The theater falls into a hush, when a group of actors play out a scene from before the curtains. They haggle for a while, at an auction, before the main attraction is offered up: a dilapidated light fixture that has certainly seen its fair share of better days. But it’s only when the prospective buyer asks to the history behind this particular piece that an unseen organ player lies upon the keys—an all-encompassing sound, that fills every pore and crevice—and the chandelier rises up, reforming into its former glory, taking its rightful place at centerstage.

I grip Kate and Landon’s hands, as the music sings every vein in my body sweet.

I don’t look, but I can feel them smiling at me.

And I think then, being brought into a world of opera houses and phantoms, masquerades and romances, that I might have, at last, finally turned the corner.

Part IV:
An English Depression,
Deeper than the River Thames

???, Middle of the Atlantic Ocean

i.

I have a sleep mask on—because apparently I’m that kind of person—and also heavily drugged on Dramamine, for the motion sickness.

So basically: I’m almost entirely comatose.

I used to flinch at every bit of turbulence as a child—and quite overdramatically at that. But as this stage of life, I limit myself to only tensing my muscles, the sinew in my forearm bunching upon the armrests but nothing more. I’ve developed coping mechanisms by now: putting headphones in so I can’t hear the dull roar of the airplane, scrolling through the photos on my phone to relive past memories, taking out a book and metering out the unintentional rhyme schemes in prose.

Or: try to sleep.

Which almost never happens.

I’m too tense. It’s like I somehow believe that if I remain vigilant, the universe can’t sneak up on me; if I keep a watch, nothing can catch me by surprise. This is ridiculous, obviously. We’ll get to our destination with or without my input. I’m not the pilot or even the co-pilot; I have no say what will or will not happen.

But it’s the illusion of control.

It's hard not to fall asleep though, like this. It's dark and it's relatively quiet; the skies have all been smooth sailing so far. I can almost imagine I'm somewhere else: somewhere not fifty thousand feet in the air, hurtling in a metal tube in a cabin full of strangers.

But then I smell it:

Something foul.

I jam a thumb underneath my mask, revealing one eye to my surroundings.

It's blurry. It's because I don't have my glasses on, I think. But then I put them on and find the area hasn't gotten any clearer in the interlude. The air is choked with something, thick and rippling and gray.

I crane my neck to look down the aisle—

—and find the cabin lights illuminating a cloud of smoke, lingering against the top of the ceiling.

Don't panic, don't panic, don't panic—

I want to believe someone's just burnt something in the microwave, but even I'm not that delusional. The scent is acerbic in nature, unmistakably electrical. It could be only be wiring of some kind or an appliance or the engine—

Oh fuck, the engine.

I glue myself to the window, straining to get a glimpse of the engine from under the plane's wing.

I can't see it well from my particular angle, but there doesn't appear to be any billowing black smoke coming from it, which is... good, I suppose.

But that means the problem must be coming from somewhere within.

I unstick myself from the window just in time to witness a flock of flight attendants fly past me, touting towels and water bottles. They don't exactly look primed to take questions, so I resist the urge to flag one of them down and grill them on just what the hell is going on.

Better to let them do their job, I think.

But I'm sweating. I'm sweating, and I might be crying—a little—and gripping the armrests white-knuckled now, trying not to come off like a lunatic. There are people all around me—other passengers—and while they look rightly concerned, frowning and whispering amongst themselves, none of them seem ready to make a run on the cockpit, like I am. I have so much coiled energy in me right now, I feel I could walk the rest of the way to London on foot, if I had to.

No—

I glance out the window.

I'd have to *swim*.

I really start to cry, then.

Why did I ever go on this dumb trip anyway? To find meaning? To be myself again? To die in a fiery plane crash, right when I've finally turned my life around and decided it's worth living again? What injustice. What cruel and fickle games the universe plays. The world has all the dice, and I'm merely a game piece, broken and bent from being stuffed in the back of the cupboard for too long. Life isn't a book, with its easily plottable beginning, middle, and end; it doesn't start with an inciting incident, build to a satisfying climax, and end happily ever after. Babies die all the time, right after birth. People get sick and keel over, without warning.

Some even get torn apart from shrapnel, after being thrown down to the earth at hundreds of miles per hour.

Would I even feel the pain? Would something so horrible even be comprehensible, on a human level? I'm reminded of something I read once on the concept of the fourth dimension: It's only a theory, because even if we were to be able to see it, we wouldn't be able to understand it. It would be so beyond our tiny brains' ability to process, it could be right out in front of us and we wouldn't be able to see anything at all.

“Votre attention s'il vous plait...”

I bark out a laugh, half-hysterical.

That's right: I transferred in Toronto. This is a French airline, layovering in London before it heads on to Paris. They're going to tell me what's going on first in French, and I'm not going to be able to understand a *thing*. What torture. What unbearable agony. What did I do to deserve such a purgatory, such an uncertain limbo?

I took Spanish in high school. *Why* did I take Spanish in high school?

I'm regretting most of my life choices at this point.

“Your attention please—”

So they've finally switched to English.

“—we regret to inform you—”

Yep, that's it. I'm as good as dead.

“—that we had to turn off all non-essential electronics. That means TV and music will be out of commission for the remainder of the flight.”

And...?

“We had a small disturbance regarding our air conditioning system. A fuse was blown, causing a bit of smoke and a bad odor, but the situation is well under control now. Our pilots

have contacted our destination's air traffic control and have determined we do not need to divert our aircraft. We will be continuing on to London, England, as scheduled."

The attendant drones on a little more after that, but I'm deaf to the rest.

I'm alive.

I'm *going* to live.

I was just starting to come around to the inevitability of this fleeting existence, and then they tell me everything's *fine*? Just like that?

Like my life is *nothing*. Just a pawn on god's cosmic chessboard.

Well, one thing's for certain, I think, if nothing else:

I definitely won't be getting any sleep, after that.

London, England

i.

I want to kiss the ground.

I want to lay my hands all over it, until I'm certain it won't fall out from under me, won't ever stray away from me again.

But I'm about to go through customs, so I try to restrain myself.

“So what brings you to London?”

This question startles me, from the agent. Thus far I have managed to avoid being asked this. They had grilled me in America, of course, but it wasn't difficult to conjure then a reason why I'd wanted entry back into my own country.

“I'm, uh... doing research. Studying.”

The man doesn't look up from my passport, going over it with a discerning eye. “What school?”

“Ah... no school.” I shuffle, awkwardly. “I'm not, like... part of a program or anything. I'm doing it independently.”

“Yeah? What are you studying then?” He's got a grizzled beard, a military-esque crew cut. I can't tell if he reminds me more of a Bond villain or of Bond himself.

“Um... literature? Writing and such?” God, if I was security, I would have already sent the dogs on me. “I—I know I'm not explaining this well—”

“No, I believe you.” He hands me back my passport—again without looking—and reaches for his pen to jot something down. “Criminals are usually far more eloquent than this.”

My first instinct is to feel righteous indignation—but it’s swiftly drowned out by a second, more potent sensation of complete and utter relief, cool and soothing like that of a balm.

I’m not going to be arrested today, then, I think.

I only nod fervently to the rest of the agent’s spiel, to get me through to the other side of the custom’s gate.

...

It’s a long street of row houses: pretty pinks and pastel blues, each with an evenly-distributed courtyard in the front complete with manicured lawn and wrought-iron fence. The cabby drops me off at the corner, bags becoming increasingly spattered with rain as he helps me unload them off and onto the curb.

The taxi speeds away when he’s finished, with a splash of gutter-water in its wake.

I drag my suitcase behind me along the sidewalk, scanning the houses for numbers.

Turns out it’s useless though, as apparently I’m one street over more than I need to be. But as I make my way to the end of the road where I’ll be able to cross over to the next block, I come upon a sandwich board, blocking my way in the middle of the path.

Charles Dickens Museum, it proudly proclaims.

Oh.

I whip my head around at it, to confirm. It looks like every other house here, save for the sign indicating its existence. I turn back around, get a little closer to squint down at the board in search of more information.

So it’s just his house?

I straighten my posture, look to the aqua-blue entry door.

Charles Dickens lived here—right here, in this inconspicuous building on this unremarkable street. He wrote and drank tea here, came home here to host dinner parties and regale guests with stories of finding Hans Christian Andersen face down in his garden, after receiving a devastatingly bad review.

I can almost see the outline of said man on the sidewalk, as though I myself was in attendance around Dickens' dining table, among those being entertained.

I hike up my bags, preparing to go inside and take a look for myself—then reconsider, feeling the way the luggage is sodden all the way through.

Another time, then.

I eventually come upon where I'll be staying: another row house, this one a soft yellow with a mint green door. As was indicated of me, I let myself in through the gate, lifting the brass knocker to alert the residents of my arrival.

It takes a while, but I can hear them coming: There is a creaking of the floorboards, from the other side. Finally it swings open, and I realize why there was such a wait:

The apparent owner is *extremely* pregnant.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I must have the wrong place—”

“No, no, you're looking for Daniel, yes?” She leans herself against the frame of the door, to rest. She's got a crystalline accent, as though talking from within the confines of a wine glass. “He's my husband, but he's out of the country for business. I'm here to show you to where you'll be staying.”

“Yes, um... That would be great, if you don't mind.”

She lifts an eyebrow at me. “Well the alternative would be to leave you out there in the rain.”

“I would honestly prefer to avoid that outcome, if at all possible.”

I follow her in and through the house. It’s very old, if not already apparent from the whining of the floors; the furnishings are all solid oak, richly upholstered with deep reds and the patterns of flowers. There’s a grandfather clock in the hallway, a kitchen with a 50s-style stovetop and fridge. The only modern part of it appears to be just before the door to the back garden: a little alcove that’s been made to be a playroom for a child, where a girl of around six sits on the ground with her Barbies.

“That’s Lulu,” the host says. “Oh—and I’m Jane. Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself.”

“That’s all right.” I forgot to as well, though she already knows my name and face from my Airbnb profile.

Lulu looks up, when her name is said. She’s got choppy, unfashionable bangs, as though she’d recently taken a pair of scissors to them herself and a barber had done everything they could to salvage what was left. She waves a little at me, with a doll in hand.

I wave back, after a beat.

“She warms up when she gets to know you better,” Jane assures.

“Yeah,” I say, though I don’t think it’s Lulu that’s the shy one in this situation.

I’m directed again outside by Jane, following in her shadow as she waddles across the grass. “Well,” she says, coming to a stop before what appears to be little more than a shed, “here you are.” She retrieves a key from her pocket and props open the door, showing me what’s within.

It's a guest house, in actuality: a cobblestone structure that smells of earth with a pull-out bed, small kitchenette, and attached bathroom. I walk inside and turn in a little circle, like a dog settling into its kennel-crate.

"Hm," I say. "Cozy."

Jane rolls her eyes, good-naturedly. "You get what you pay for."

"No, it's fine." I hoist my bags up onto the bed. "I'm just going to... unpack, for the time being. Thanks for letting me in."

"Of course," says Jane, and then she's waddling back towards the house, with that oddly specific stride that belies a heavy weight in the abdomen despite how she looks perfectly normal from the back.

Bizarre.

I pull apart my belongings, to take a proper assessment of the damage. As I thought, it's all soaked through to the lining: socks drenched, shoes sodden, clothes and scarves and hats and all else dispersing water when I wring them out over the packed-dirt floor.

There's a clothes drying rack up against the wall in the corner: a tiny wire thing, that unfolds when I try to bend it. So I place it on the ground near the oven and lay my clothes overtop—though I run out of space rather quickly and have to resort to more creative measures, stringing things over cabinet doors, on hooks, over the showerhead and the headboard.

By the end of it, I'm surrounded by the entirety of my wardrobe, with only the sound of dripping water as companion.

I collapse onto the bed, in a starfish position. The blanket is a quilt, unraveling a little at the edges. Seems handmade. I wriggle under it and close my eyes to the dull tones of water running off shingles, against window panes and blades of grass.

I fall asleep there, because it feels as if there's nothing else for me—
—then awake an hour or so later, to a knocking on the door.

“Who is it?” I say, inanely.

“Jane,” Jane says. “I noticed you weren't going out for dinner... Are you all right?”

“Huh? Yeah, totally. Just tired. Not hungry, much.” Though I haven't really taken
mental inventory yet.

She's quiet, for a while.

“Do you... want to come in? I'm making pasta.” She says “pasta” like “paa-sta,” rather
than “pah-sta.” It sounds more pleasant that way, somehow. “Do you like pesto? I could make
marinara if you prefer.”

“I'm not picky,” I say, though I haven't yet committed to anything.

“Okay, good.” I can almost see Jane running hands down an apron, with splashes of
paint in the shape of her daughter's hands upon the hem. “Come in then...? In about twenty
minutes?”

“All right.” I don't know what compels me, but I desperately wish to please her.

The motherly air about her contributes, I suppose.

She walks away, with that burdened stride.

I begin to pull on whatever's halfway dry, slowly—then double-speed, when my brain
finally catches up to where my actions should be.

Shit, I should really be helping her.

I trip inside the house, with one shoe partly off.

“Oh—” Jane stands before the stove, brandishing a spatula. “I wasn't expecting you yet.
I'm not finished—”

“I came to cook with you—that is, if you need the help of course,” I tack on at the end, just in case she finds any fault in that.

But she only smiles at me, sunnily. “That would be great. Can you chop some garlic for me?”

“I’m on it.”

She’s only got sharpened plastic utensils—because of the kids, I realize—so the process takes a little longer than usual. There’s scuff marks on the counter, grease stains in the grout. Many meals have been made here, long before Jane and her family came along, I think. The kitchen feels lived in, stretched out like a well-worn sweater. I put the ingredients in the blender as Jane tells me to, only pausing in my task when I feel a tug on my pantleg.

Lulu looks up at me, with giant brown eyes.

“You’re all wet,” she tells me, astutely.

“Yeah,” I say. “It was raining.”

“Don’t you have a coat?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Why didn’t you wear it?”

“Forgot.”

“Weren’t you cold?”

“Not really.”

Lulu stares. “You sound kind of weird, you know that?”

“*Lulu*,” Jane says.

“It’s okay,” I assure her. I turn my attention again to the girl. “Yeah, I’m not from around here.”

“Why do you talk like that?”

“I don’t know. Why do you talk the way you talk?”

“Cause that’s the way my mummy talks.”

A surprisingly logical answer.

I go back to my scraping of the cutting board. “What is ‘Lulu’ short for anyway, if I may ask?”

“Lou-is-a,” Lulu pronounces carefully, with a flair for the dramatic at the end.

“That’s pretty.”

“M’hm.” Lulu pads over to her mother, running tiny fingers down the side of her belly.

“And this is Oliver.”

“Oh.” I look to Jane. “So you already have a name picked out.”

“Yes,” Jane says, stirring the noodles in their pot. “We decided pretty early on.”

“That’s cool,” I say, for lack of anything better.

Jane tells Lulu to set the table; I help, handing her plates from the higher up cupboards, coming behind her to straighten the silverware from where she places it. I don’t know why I care. It’s not as though the queen is going to drop by—but something in me wants to make it nice.

It’s been ages since I’ve had a proper old-fashioned, sit-down family dinner.

When the pasta is done, we all carry it out and huddle around the table.

The small talk is simple but surprisingly painless.

“What do you do for a living, then?” Jane asks me.

“Uh—” *I write*, I want to say. But that’s not exactly true. I’ve been coasting off my savings for over a year now—and you kind have to, you know, *actually write* to call yourself a

writer. “It’s... kind of complicated. I guess I’m... a student? I’ve written some books though.”

The statement feels safe, in the past tense.

Jane’s butter knife clatters against her plate. “You’ve written *books*?”

“Ah, yeah... a couple.” Three, to be precise.

“As in... actually published books? Books that I could go out and purchase?”

“Oh god, please don’t.” I rub at the back of my neck. “But yes.”

She stares at me. Folds her napkin upon her lap and picks up her cutlery again. “Now... *hypothetically*, if these books of yours would just *so happen* to end up in my possession... would the author of said books *oh-so graciously* sign them for me?”

I groan. “I... suppose...?”

“Excellent.” She forks some pasta in her mouth, with a satisfied grin.

I clear my throat, look to Lulu who’s only been eating in perfect silence and swinging her legs back and forth off her chair contently. “And uh... what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Lulu doesn’t even think. She’s says it through a mouthful of food, sputtering it all over the argyle tablecloth. “Happy!”

Oh, I think. My eyes well up, inexplicably.

I guess I never knew that was an option.

iii.

No one will ever hate Sherlock Holmes as much as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle hated Sherlock Holmes.

He killed him.

In-universe.

It was a deeply unpopular decision at the time—and then retconned years later, when Doyle started to really feel the sting of missing those sweet, sweet royalty checks.

But until his dying breath, it was a well-known fact that Doyle absolutely, unequivocally *loathed* being known as “the Sherlock Holmes writer.”

Because first of all, he was a doctor.

A doctor with a struggling medical practice that needed some supplementary income, yes. But a doctor nonetheless. So what was one to do, you may ask?

Well.

Start writing, apparently.

221B Baker Street is one of the most infamous addresses in all of fiction. But it’s also—you may not know—a real place: a real apartment on a real street, neatly folded into the London borough of Westminster.

It's a museum, for all things Sherlock Holmes. A quaint little Victorian flat: three stories altogether, with workers who dress in period clothes and a cramped gift shop on the ground floor stuffed to the rafters with merchandise.

There's not much to look at, really, but it's enough: pocket watches and diaries, authentic Victorian revolvers nested in silk and tucked behind paned glass. The third floor takes a page out of Madam Tussauds, with life-like recreations of famous Holmes villains. Moriarty is there, of course, but you'd almost overlook him if a tour guide didn't go out of their way to point him out. His book portrayal is not nearly as theatric as his film or TV counterparts; a homely mathematics professor he is not, in later adaptations.

Just like everything else, he had to evolve with the times.

The gift shop boasts no mention of Arsène Lupin, Holmes' unofficial rival, which disappoints me. The phantom thief was written into a crossover with the famous detective by the former's author, Maurice Leblanc, as an homage of sorts. The only problem was that he—*whoops*—forgot to ask permission to do so beforehand from Doyle, which as you can imagine ruffled some feathers. Since copyright law was then in its infancy, Doyle didn't have the appropriate grounds to sue at the time, but he did openly demonstrate his distaste for the piece and demanded Leblanc remove Sherlock Holmes' name from the entirety of his work.

So he did.

And that's how *Arsène Lupin versus Herlock Shlomes* was born.

I buy a mug from the shop and wrap it up in my coat, when I finally go out to brave the elements.

The day is turning to night, when I step out onto the street. I'm cold—my nose is running—but clammy beneath my scarf. There's a wind-chill that whips through me, like water

running through a sieve. I arrange for a driver to pick me up, drop me off somewhere that serves warm soup, preferably, before I call it a night.

By the time I'm dipping buttered toast into lentil broth, I'm starting to shake and perspire to a level I know I can no longer attribute to the weather.

Oh no.

It had to happen eventually, I reason. All the late nights, all the airports; of course I would fall ill, given enough time. But I loathe to be sick. Because when I am sick, I am useless, and when I am useless, I am miserable.

And god knows I don't need any help, in being miserable.

I pay for my food with bills that bear the visage of Jane Austen. She seems to stare up at me, with disdain.

She wouldn't have stood for this, I think. Austen was the type to churn out encyclopedic-length novels once per year—and all while remaining under the veil of anonymity throughout, simply because she was a woman. She wouldn't have just keeled over from a cold.

But I would.

Oh, I would indeed.

I trudge back to the house slow, with my coat zippered up to my chin. The shadows are long; these are the streets of Jekyll and Hyde. I pick up my pace with the thought, even though I know it's absurd to do so.

Still, I'm breathing hard, when I finally let myself through into Jane's back garden.

...

I burn with fever, the whole night through.

I feel like death come dawn, squinting into warm melanin tones as they break through rain-speckled windows. It doesn't feel as though the sun has a right to show itself, today.

Frankly, I'm shocked it has the gall.

I roll over and try to force sleep upon myself, once more.

It must work, because I wake later, to Jane knocking at my door.

"I don't mean to bother you," she says, as a precursor, "but I have those books, if you don't mind...?"

I groan—then hope most ardently she didn't catch it. "Sorry, but I can't right now. I've caught a cold or something, and I don't want you to get it."

"Oh," she deflates. I can still sense her, shuffling her feet behind the door. "Okay, one moment."

I watch her amble across the lawn back inside.

What could she possibly mean by that, I wonder.

But I don't have to wait long to find out.

She returns mere minutes later but this time to the side window, placing something upon the pane before she raps her fist against the top of the glass, bumping it ajar. "Here," she says, scooching the offering forward. "Some tea for you, with lots of honey. It'll clear you right up."

She doesn't even wait for me to thank her. Just turns and walks away, like it's nothing at all.

When I at last drag my pitiful carcass across the way to take a sip from the mug, it's like drinking directly from the basin of liquid life.

...

I'm not exactly *well* the next day, but I hate to lose any more time to inanity. So I hit up the convenience store, being sure to stuff my pockets to the brim with throat lozenges before I make my way out once more.

Buckingham Palace cuts an imposing figure, when I first come up to it. There are guards at every corner, moving only on rare occasion. Other than that, it seems a doll house: a thousand eyes, looking in. A crowd of tourists clamor around the iron gate; one tells a joke through the bars, vying to get a man with a machine gun to crack a smile.

He does, shockingly.

I make my way opposite—to the Queen Victoria monument—and sit myself down upon the cold stone steps.

This is what survived the war, I think, and am suddenly struck with it. This is the image people had in their heads, when they heard King George IV's stuttering voice over the radio, telling everyone to keep a stiff upper lip. This is what wormed its way into the collective human consciousness, into C.S. Lewis's Narnia and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth: the steadfast belief that what was to come could be better than what came before, that we could all be kings and queens, heroes of our own narratives.

That the world was inherently good and that it had at least some parts worth fighting for.

I turn into my own elbow, with a sneeze that rattles my whole head.

I decide quite out of nowhere then that I need a drink.

There's a pub down the way, that advertises good quality fish and chips. The place is packed when I let myself in; the chairs clustered around the door don't seem up to code. I wait at a table for a long time—then realize I need to approach the bar to order a drink, in observing the locals.

I get up to do just that.

“Ah, you look proper done in, mate.”

The bartender is Scottish, from the accent. She stands short from the ground but thick and sturdy, like a fine bramble.

I feel like I should be offended by the comment but can't even begin to muster the energy to do so.

And she is right, after all.

“Yeah, I'm sick.”

“Don't be givin' that to me,” she says, stacking cups. “But hang tight. I'll get you something even the plague wouldn't live through.”

“I welcome it.”

She pours me something into a highball glass that looks about the consistency of crude oil. I don't bother to feign a dainty sip—just chug the whole thing down, with audible gulps.

And oh, and if I wasn't warm before, I'm *broiling* then.

“I call that ‘one shot to the temple,’” the bartender says, arranging her fingers in the shape of a gun and holding them to her own head.

“That's exactly what it feels like,” I confirm for her.

She nods, self-satisfied. “That'll knock your cold right out.”

“Could I get some food as well?”

“You needn't be askin', silly thing. Just tell me what you want.”

I tell her. The food comes, while I'm still contemplating the merits of death. I decide not to return to the table and eat at the bar instead.

“American?” the woman says some time later, when I have a fry halfway dangling out of my mouth.

“Um, yeah.”

“How’s your president?”

“How’s your Brexit?” I counter.

“Ooh. Cheeky.” She wipes a glass of dirt, with a faraway look in her eyes. “Useless, ain’t they? The lot of ‘em.”

I take a pull from a second drink. “What about the royal family?” I stab a filet of fish. “Any opinions about them?”

“Eh, they’re all right.” She shrugs. “Can’t complain about ol’ Queenie. She’s got a couple of shit kids though.”

I laugh. “Oh, really?”

“Grandbabies haven’t fucked up so far, so that’s a plus.”

“I see.”

“You takin’ a poll or somethin’?”

“No, just curious.”

Just as I go about finishing up my food, she heads to the end of the bar to retrieve her coat off a rack.

“Not staying for the dinner rush?” I ask.

She straightens out her collar, runs fingers down the lapel. “Nah, the in-laws are in town. The missus is makin’ a stew.” She says “stew” like it has a “y” in it.

“Ah.” I smile, into my glass. “Have a good time then. And thanks for the drink.”

“You bet.” She waves over her shoulder at me. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I say back, even though I’m not entirely sure of the sentiment behind it.

It’s only then, when she’s out on the street, that I realize my sore throat is almost entirely gone.

...

I fall asleep on the train.

It’s not a smart move. It’s not a move at all, really. I merely flop against the window, the vitality drained out of me with sick and drink and the satisfaction of a full belly. My mind is not quiet though; it races, record-scratches with recurring thoughts:

—rocks in the pockets—

—of a well-tailored coat—

—head in the oven—

—with towels stoppered under the door—

I blink my eyes open, and all the world comes into focus once more.

Oh, to be a statistic. To be reduced to a number: a tick mark upon a chart of thousands more. Sometimes it was that thought alone that kept me going: a spite, a desire to not succumb to the typical death of a creative.

A longing to live well past my prime, keep a windowsill garden in a one-bedroom and read books until I flitter away, piece by piece.

But in the meantime, I only scribble “Virginia Woolf” and “Sylvia Plath” onto a scrap of paper and tuck it into the folds of my notebook, like a pressed leaf.

And that’s just what they were, weren’t they? Fallen fragments of a season ended, further prolonged and preserved only through the actions of another: from a long chain of others, that wouldn’t let a name fade from the collective lips of posterity.

An imprint upon a page, left behind on a world that could have used a couple more but must content themselves with what is left.

iv.

It's hard to know where to step, in Westminster Abbey.

The air is dry as bone. Every sound—no matter how minuet—carries in these halls. The candles flicker, when patrons pass. Each tread is a pilgrimage; each breath, a eulogy.

And you're only sometimes made aware that you're standing over someone's grave.

I sit under William Shakespeare, at Poets' Corner. It's the section with the most writers congregated—the majority of them being posthumous and without remains. Their corporeal forms have either been lost or stolen or else claimed by family and laid to rest another place; but here they are honored with statues or tablets, inscriptions that describe their accomplishments and good deeds done on earth. It started with Chaucer and went from there: the Brontë sisters, Byron, the Shelleys, Wilde, Carroll, Eliot, and Keats.

It's an unsettling place: this wasteland of stone and marble. But the spirits are never truly alone. They have each other—and the people who come to visit, who sit in this hall solely to think of them, if only for a moment.

I stop on my way out through the nave, eyes catching something pitch-black etched into the granite floor.

The plaque looks new—which is what initially brought my attention to it—and clearly well loved. A bouquet of roses is posted at every corner. In the center: a black hole, as though to draw the flowers in. And within the stone itself, engraved around the outer edge of the spiral, an inscription reads: HERE LIES WHAT WAS MORTAL OF STEPHEN HAWKING.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised, but I am. What was a very outspoken atheist's remains doing being buried in a Catholic cathedral, I wonder. Surely he couldn't have signed off on that, right?

But then I take note of the plaques immediately to Hawking's left and right: Sir Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, they read. A man whose "heretical" teachings were banned by the church and the father of evolution, respectively. Three scientists who did a number to the institution of religion, and they were *here*, of all places?

Was this some kind of... sick prank on them? Well after their deaths and when they could do nothing to combat it?

I take out my phone to further look into it, but there isn't a prayer's worth of reception, in this chancel.

So I resort to pulling an abbey volunteer aside. They're easy to pick out, after all, what with their Hogwarts-esque blue overcoats complete with coat-of-arms upon the breast. "Excuse me, but I had a question if you don't mind...?"

"Not at all," the woman says, slurring the last two words together with a cockney sort of twang.

I point to Hawking, upon the floor. "Is he okay with this?"

She blinks, at where I point. "Oh, course!" She laughs—mostly to break the tension, but it makes me feel ridiculous all the same. "He ordained it."

I can't quite conceal my shock at this, evidently, as she laughs at me even further.

"We bury all sorts here. Anyone important to Britain's great history. In fact—" She pauses, digs through her pocket for a pamphlet and leafs through the pages in a wholly familiar way. "—the dean of Westminster said this, when the plaque was first dedicated: 'Whether a person believes in god or not, if someone is achieving extraordinary things, then I believe god is in that process.'"

I'm struck still, by this account.

"I see." I don't, but to admit such a thing feels like weakness. "And 'god' would be... in the literal sense, you mean." My tone turns it into a question, at the very last second.

"Well, this *is* a church," the volunteer says. "But I suppose you could look at it in a myriad of ways." She holds her hand out, palm offered up as though before the pulpit. "Hawking's house of worship was his school; his Bible, what he could prove. If he felt god through methods different from our own, who is to say that is not valid?"

"Who indeed." The church has become remarkably progressive in its recent years, I think.

Or perhaps I've just been away a lot longer than I thought.

Coming out of the cathedral is a bit like coming out of a movie theater midday: the sun is too bright, for the occasion. I go to lift a hand to my forehead to block it out, only to feel my pocket vibrate with a barrage of texts.

They're from Jane. Every single one of them.

Hello, just wanted to let you know I'm going to hospital

For the baby!!!!

Sorry if that scared you, it's nothing serious

Not that delivering a baby isn't serious...

Can you tell that I'm nervous?

I'm nervous

Daniel's here with me btw

He got on the first flight back, when the contractions hit late last night

So you don't have to worry about Lulu

Hope your research is going well!!!

I'm going to have a hernia, I fear.

I nearly crack my phone screen, pressing down on her number to place a call.

“Hel—?”

“Tell me where you are right now. Have you made it to the hospital yet? Do you need a ride?”

“No, I called for an ambulance—”

“What? *Why?* I could have driven you! Ambulances are so expensive!”

There's silence, from the other end. “All right, one:” she states, eerily calm, “I can about guarantee you've never driven on the left side of the road before in your life. And two: ambulances are free here, under the NHS. So it cost me absolutely nothing at all.”

Oh.

“Nice system you have here,” I say, the wind having been taken out of my sails.

“Yes, I'm a fan.” There's shuffling on the other side, as though she's adjusting the phone. She breaths—loud and into the receiver—ending it with a small whine. “Anyway, I'm fine,” she says finally, as though in afterthought. “Daniel's here, Lulu's here. Oliver's... almost here. Shouldn't be long.”

“Okay, um...” I shuffle, lean against the outer wall of the chapel. “You, uh... want me to do anything?”

She’s quiet, for a long time. “If you want to come, you can come.”

I almost don’t understand her, initially.

“To hospital—to *the* hospital. To wait for the baby. If you want, that is.”

I nearly drop everything on my person, in my haste to copy down the address as she gives it to me verbatim.

I hate hospitals, truthfully, and would avoid them altogether if practical. The sterile environment, the cloying scent of antiseptic... The mint green scrubs, the bare white walls. The poking and the prodding and the intrusive questions, one after another after another.

But the maternity ward is a bit different.

The atmosphere is friendlier. The color palettes lean more towards the pastel blues and pinks, with flowers on the counters and stickers upon the chairs.

The waiting room has two flat screen TVs: one playing a generic home improvement show, where the hosts are installing a lovely kitchen backsplash; and the other a kids’ cartoon, featuring animals singing a song about teamwork.

I don’t know whether to watch one or the other or just ignore all pretenses and start drowning in my existential dread now.

I’m still deciding what to do when a nurse from the reception counter calls over to me.

“You there, are you here for the Reeds?”

“Uh, yes...?”

“Baby’s delivered and mum’s healthy. We’ll bring you back when we’re given the all-clear.”

Well.

That was quick.

I'm not quite so high-strung, after that.

But it's a long while until I'm finally ushered in—though admittedly, I'm not overly familiar with how these things typically go. I note posters along the walls of the corridor, as we walk: how to breathe, how to best sit and lie down to avoid undue discomfort. I imagine those might be helpful in the moment, when you're out of your mind with pain.

God knows access to your higher faculties can get thrown straight out the window, in dire circumstances.

I don't even recognize the thing in Jane's arms as a baby, when I'm brought in. It's so *small*. Hardly could have come out of Jane, with how big her stomach was. But he's all there: tiny fingers and toes, snuffly nose and wrinkled chin. He's got a beanie over his head, pulled down to where brunette hairs curl around the ears.

Jane laughs, at whatever facial expression I must be making. "You're having a funnier reaction than even Lu'."

Lulu bounces, from where she's leaned against the bed.

"You, ah..." My hands twitch, at my sides. "Congratulations."

Jane throws her head, trying to get a sweat-stained strand of hair out of her eyes. The man beside her—Daniel, I gather—reaches forward to remove it for her. "Thank you." She looks down at Oliver, still bundled in her arms. "Much quicker than the first one but just as dramatic." She loosens her arms, just a touch. "Care to hold him?"

I swallow. "Can I?"

"Of course."

I've held babies before but never this young. I sit down for it, allowing the father to pass him over to me. He's warm—unbearably soft and warm. Like a little bean burrito, all wrapped up in his swaddle. I watch his chest, obsessively, for any movement: to make sure he's breathing, always still there.

I would die for this baby. I would *live* for this baby.

My throat catches, with the absolute certainty of the thought.

And this is what god is, I think, holding that little one ever closer. This is what achieves extraordinary things.

Part V:
Mastering the Art of
French Acceptance

Paris, France

i.

I feel as though I should hold my breath, as we pass under the English Channel.

Realistically, I know there's air. Or at least... I should know. But the black void beyond the train windows is unsettling, in a wholly primal way. Like being reverted back to the days of the homosapien, when our ancestors roamed the jungles and somehow knew—down to the molecules—to be wary of every shadow.

A weight lifts from my chest, when I can see the stars again.

The atrium ceiling of Gare du Nord is a pale pink, as the train at last slows to a stop. Everyone stands in the aisles, though the doors are yet to be open. I listen in to the tail-end of a conversation I'd been eavesdropping on all the while between an old man and a young mixed-race woman, the latter regaling the former about her dual citizenship, thanks to a Jamaican mother.

I wonder where she's going, as I drop off the final stair of the railcar, my suitcase banging against the concrete floor just behind me.

The station's lit a soft gold, but the atmosphere is oppressive, heavy. Like my bags could be separated from me at any moment. I quickly fish for my notebook, flip through the pages for the address of where I'll be staying.

The last address.

The last “stay.”

It’s twilight, out on the street: the magic hour, the time of the fae—when any sound grows obtrusive, when any light draws tall and narrow and dances against the ground in patterns unknown. I pass by the taxis stalling out front, as I’ve been warned most of them will overcharge, and instead call for a car and sit myself out on the curb.

The restaurants across the way are dim, signs not yet turned over for morning open. There’s some movement in the windows—a man sweeping a closed-door patio, a woman cutting flowers at a booth—but nothing major, nothing flagrant. The soft orchestral pluckings of a harp waft through the air, from an apartment above a baker’s shop. I blink my eyes once just a tad too slow and almost feel pulled under, drowned by the siren-song of a world that doesn’t yet want to wake up.

But that’s exactly when my ride chooses to show up, of course.

Soon after, I’m punching a code into a lock, to retrieve a key from where it’s bolted to the outside of a pipe. The compartment clicks open, after some fenagling; then I’m letting myself into the hallway that leads into my flat. It’s dark inside, unless you go out of your way to flip on a timed switch. It’s like this corner of the universe is still hiding from the Nazis, some eighty years later.

The apartment itself is essentially a closet—until, that is, you peek into the other room over and realize *that one* is the closet, with its strewn paper towel rolls and soaps stacked waist-high. There’s a sink and toilet in there somewhere, but I’ll have to dig it out. For now I only dump my things on the bed, then sit myself at the bay window, where it juts out from the wall and overlooks the street below.

It's little more than a porthole, to be frank, but the view isn't terrible. It hosts a good enough look at the baroque fixtures of the Parisian square: iron plating at the entries, brick and mortar lain at the corners. The foliage is meticulously maintained, hedges of all shapes sitting comfortably in their clay pots.

I lay my head against the sill and listen to the hum of new culture, as it comes to life around me.

I could fall asleep there, but I don't.

After all, I have a date with destiny.

The walk is long and meandering, full of rose-gold signposts and slivers of sidewalks that wind and weave. The city is properly awake now, sipping lattes outside cafés, smoking cigarettes in the park. Deliverymen haul crates of inventory in and out of stores; two movers struggle with an armoire, as they reason with it up a flight of ancient-looking stairs.

I almost head in outright, seeing my destination up ahead—then think better of it, when I see there's a florist right outside the entrance.

Opportunists, no doubt.

It takes a while to find the exact flowers I'm looking for, but I do, eventually: green carnations, with soft, crimped petals that spiral inwards towards the center. They're not a natural color of the carnation, and thus, harder to come by.

But of course they'd be here, before Père Lachaise Cemetery.

The park area is well preserved. There's fresh gravel on the pathway, grass that's meticulously pruned. It's quiet but not unsettlingly so; there are plenty of visitors that stalk the grounds—back and forth and back again—but they're not the type to make much noise, other than from the crunch of their footsteps or the occasional light bit of chatter.

I get directions from a guard at the main gate, then make my way forward.

Oscar Wilde's grave is on the outer edge of a middle plot: a large slab of rock, roughly two people-high, that's easy to pick out. For one, it's surrounded by a barrier to avoid anyone from further disturbing it, as it's been vandalized in the past; but that hasn't stopped the occasional admirer from smudging their lipstick across the glass, throwing flowers over the wall in so that they can be just *that* much closer to their beloved writer.

And two, well...

It's hideous.

Only my opinion, of course, but mine all the same. There's a statue of what's meant to be an angel carved into the side, but I don't think it resembles an angel in the least. More of a winged Egyptian pharaoh, if I had to guess. But certainly no angel.

Taking Wilde's tastes—eccentric though they may be—into consideration, I don't think he'd like it very much at all.

I pace around the mausoleum, to find its inscription upon the stone. It's on the very back: some lines from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, from when Wilde was imprisoned in a hard labor camp for the "crime" of being attracted to his own sex.

And alien tears will fill for him

Pity's long-broken urn,

For his mourners will be outcast men,

And outcasts always mourn.

A rush of breath leaves me, all at once. I'd been chasing him from country to country for months now—a little in Greece, a lot in England—and this is where I find him, in the end. This is where the trail goes cold, where I find the frayed tip of the unraveled thread.

I clutch my flowers, from where they rest in the crook of my elbow. “It’s a shame we have to meet like this.”

“Allô?”

Every muscle in my body pulls taut.

No, it’s—

It’s not—

My feet find ground under me, circling the tomb. I can hear the steps of the not-stranger, as he does the same. We meet on the side, in the middle: mirror images, with that god-awful angel positioned between us, hanging in suspension like a bad omen.

“Casper?”

He drags a hand through his hair, clutching at the curls. He’s still got that cutting smirk: where his right canine bites into his lower lip. “Yeah?”

And it’s then I know that I’m unequivocally fucked.

ii.

“What are you...?” I can hardly find the words. “What are you... doing... here?”

Casper’s expression—initially elated—turns all at once turns cold. “I told you, didn’t I? That I’d be studying abroad here for my doctorate?”

He did say that, yes.

I am an idiot.

“Why do you...?” My eyes narrow, slightly. “Why don’t you look nearly as surprised to see me as I do?”

Casper takes out his phone, from his pocket. “You know we still follow each other on our socials, right? You never did block me.”

Indeed I did not.

I am a *double* idiot.

“I thought that’d be mean,” I say, so quiet I almost can’t quite pick it up myself.

But Casper does. Casper is observant, like that. “How nice of you,” he says, sardonically.

“No, I—you—you did nothing wrong, and—”

“Fuck, I don’t wanna hear it.” He shoves his phone back, deep down. “Just... just put those flowers down, if you’re going to.”

I do so, without lifting my eyes off of him.

He stares at me, for a long time.

“*Ugh*,” he says finally. He turns, gesturing at me over his shoulder. “Okay, come on, if you’re gonna look like that.”

I follow him across the lawn, as though strung up on a line. “Like what?”

He tells me, with his back still turned, “Like... like a kicked puppy or something. I dunno.”

But he does know. I was always knew him to be good with words too.

We take the train: a shoulder’s-width apart. I fold my hands upon my lap and pull at the skin, running a thumb over the forefinger. “How’s, ah... school?” I say, feeling a bit like a distant great aunt trying to bridge the gap in her mind between the squealing toddler she once knew and a man now grown.

Casper leans back, jamming an elbow between us over the crest of the subway seat. “It’s all right. Like the research, hate the teaching. Kids always drain me dry.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, only half hearing him.

We get off at Gare de Saint-Michel. In ascending the stairs, my mouth drops, getting an eyeful of Notre Dame Cathedral from across the Seine. Casper stops—in noticing I’ve ceased following him—and circles back, to collect me. “It’s closed, you know,” he says, hooking my arm to drag me along.

“Y-yeah,” I say. And I did know. But it’s one thing to know and another entirely to witness.

We order crêpes on the water—my *second*, I realize, after the first I had in Japan. This one’s fried and made flatter—pancake-esque—with strawberries and cream, a scoop of vanilla

garnishing the top. The “Notre Dame Special,” they call it. Nothing about it harkens Notre Dame in particular, but considering the view, I give them a pass.

“So,” Casper starts, cutting into his crêpe, “I can extrapolate why you’re here, from your most recent posts. But what exactly were you doing visiting Wilde at eight AM?”

“I could ask you the same,” I say.

“I came for *school*,” he says, as though I’ve accused him of something nefarious. He stabs a strawberry, with not inconsiderable force. Then, quieter— “And I couldn’t sleep.”

I want to ask why—but I also don’t want to ask why, ever. I don’t want to know any more about him, actually, if I can help it. To learn more would be to distort my memory of him as it once was: as a perfect victim, a casualty.

I wrote him out of my personal narrative, long ago.

“I came to... pay my respects,” I answer finally, and it’s not an altogether lie. There was some of that, in my visit. Wilde became a regular fixture in my studies over the years, familiar as an old friend: his escapades at Oxford, his scandalous tryst with Walt Whitman, his snarky remarks and eventual fate to the ignorances of the times. It’s a classic tale, with easily definable traits: hubris, catharsis, ethos and pathos. Arguably anagnorisis never came, but that’s only due to the nature of that moment in history.

He truly was the embodiment of “born in the wrong era.”

Casper stares. I think he’s trying to keep me contained too, in his own way. “And you decided to do it first thing in the morning, huh?”

I shrug.

We finish our food, wander around just outside the shop. There’s a ten-piece band playing out on the street that’s accumulated a sizeable crowd. When we work our way forward,

I'm shocked to see it mostly consists of horns, even including a tuba in the very back. I drop a euro into their open trunk for that, if nothing else—but then Casper goes about shuffling me along to the place next door.

SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY, the sign above it proudly proclaims.

“So what are you doing here, *really*?” Casper says. His attention is allotted to a box of books, adjacent to the door. He drags calloused fingers along the spines, as though looking for something in particular.

“I thought you knew,” I say, because I'm tired of summarizing my life for others' convenience.

Casper lifts a book, grips it lightly as though gaging its weight. “It's not about me then?”

Not everything's about you, I want to say. “You truly think I'd use my life's savings visiting five separate countries as an elaborate excuse to end up here with you?”

Casper gives me that toothy smile again. “Très romantique, no?”

“Fuck off.”

“Okay, okay!” Casper laughs. “I'll take that as a no.” He slides the book back where it belongs.

The inside of Shakespeare and Co. is all at once comfortable and deeply claustrophobic. “Cozy,” I guess you would say, if one were to try to dress it up. It's all floor-to-ceiling shelves; people have to get around by side-stepping, winding themselves in a tight line around the vicinity of the shop. But no one's in a particular hurry here, so there's time to meander, really take it all in.

The entry consists of all the works by the various writers who have visited the store in person. I run a hand along one of the tables, feeling out their names: Hemingway, the

Fitzgeralds, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence. There's obviously some Frenchmen among them that I'm less familiar with, and I tuck some of their smaller collections into my arms, to become more acquainted to them.

Casper just shakes his head at me at this, in playful chagrin.

"You've cut your hair," Casper says, as I survey a sprawling collection of Agatha Christie.

Immediately I feel for the back of my head. "Uh... yeah. Back in Tokyo."

"It's nice," he says. "Fresh."

"Thanks."

"What else about you is new?"

That makes me blush. That should *not* make me blush.

But Casper only laughs at me. "You're always so easy to rile up."

Is that all this is to him? "Riling"?

I go to purchase my books, but Casper stops me, points up a flight of stairs. I wouldn't have even noticed there was a second story, had he not shown me.

It's not part of the bookshop proper, turns out; it's more of a library, with old texts you can borrow or sit with to read for as long as you'd like. The air is choked with dust and the scent of permanent marker, from where the books pile high and the wall is crowded with Post-It notes, featuring greetings in a myriad of different languages and little doodles in the margins. But Casper takes me past it: to a small room in the very back, which hosts an armchair in the corner.

And on that armchair is a beautiful brown cat, curled tightly in a ball.

“*Oh—*” I fall to my knees before it, as though in benediction. I drag a hand through its fur, feeling a purr drumming up beneath my fingers. “Oh, this place has *everything.*”

“I knew you’d like this,” Casper says, just a bit smug. He gets on the ground too, leaning his elbow against the chair. “Her name’s Aggie, by the way.”

“Oh, Ms. Agnes,” I say. I pick up her paw; she churrs, deep in her throat, but otherwise doesn't stir. “It is a pleasure.”

When we finally make it out, Casper lingers by the door.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, juts one foot out. “Will I, uh... see you again?” *Will you leave me again,* he doesn't say.

I blink. Consider it. “I'll... be around. For a while.”

“Yeah.” I know it's not the answer he's seeking.

“Well,” I elaborate, “I will need someone adept at French, probably.”

He perks up at this. “I'm your guy.”

“Yeah.” I lean in, grasp him by the shoulder—then pull away, before I can dare to take it any further. “See you later then.”

I end up hailing a taxi—to see the sights, I reason—but spend the entirety of the ride staring out at nothing instead, mentally living a life in my head that was never given a chance to live.

iii.

It's a street like any other.

Except it's not. Because here—at the intersection of Rue Saint-Martin and Rue Saint-Denis—in 1832, a group of schoolboys took to the streets and erected a barricade to protest the apparent injustices of the time.

They all died, mind you. Or well... most of them. Accounts are conflicting. But the story of their valiant fight had such an impact on one Victor Hugo that, from it, one of the most well-known and longest stories ever put to paper was born.

(It should be noted that Hugo was paid by the word, as was the custom at the time in nineteenth-century France.)

(So I'd imagine anyone would be tempted to go off topic a little, if it proved profitable.)

He was an odd one, that Victor Hugo. Writers often tend to be—but he especially so. He wrote entirely in the nude. He once sent a bat—and yes, a live one—in an envelope to his wife, as a wedding gift. He was made a saint in the Vietnamese religion of Cao Dai. His middle name was “Marie.” He was exiled from France, for a time. When he died, all the brothels in Paris closed for a night of mourning in his honor.

I could go on.

But the people he wrote about were real too.

They stood here—lived and breathed and died here—on this tiny stretch of road—more of an alley, really—as a monument to their cause. People truly threw down furniture from their rooms, sheltering them from the gunfire. People truly walked the road come morning, to pick among the dead.

And now it's but a square like any other, with its restaurants and coffeeshops, its bars and flats. The only evidence of the June Rebellion ever existing lies in the architecture: how old it is, how the surface is scratched up from something very serious indeed.

I feel at the brick of it, my skin catching at the uneven features.

I walk a little more down the road. There's a daycare or a preschool, at the corner. Little girls in matching dresses grasp at each other's hands, as they make their way forward. A teacher counts their heads as they pass through the door.

There's a plaque beside the entrance that could give me some more context—but it's in French, of course.

“Excuse me,” I say to the teacher. She looks at me brightly, so I feel like there's a chance I can be understood. I point to the sign, as a guide. “What does this say?”

“In English?” she questions, her accent severe.

I wince. “If at all possible.”

“Well...” She squints at the words, as though seeing them for the first time. “It's, ah... commemorative. For the school.” She points to the date, at the top. “See here: 1941. It's... It's a descriptions of the events at that time, when the Nazis controlled France. And—” She tilts her head. “—and explains that the schoolboard at the time were... ‘actively complicit’? No, that can't be right—”

“No, I like that,” I say. “Keep going.”

She startles, slightly, at my zeal but trudges on: “It describes how the school at the time volunteered the names of Jewish students, in order to avoid conflict—and that they acknowledge that this was the wrong thing to do and that they are deeply repentant of these actions.”

“I see.” It’s an ice bath of an answer—but a necessary one all the same. “Thank you.”

The teacher nods at me, then reaches for the knob of the door and shuts it behind her.

...

I can’t go in—*I know that*—but I find I’m drawn like a magnet to it regardless.

Notre Dame stands tall and grand, stark against the pale of the mid-winter light. Its highest spires are wrapped in scaffolding, but the majesty is hardly waned; the exposed parts of its skeleton only make it seem more ethereal—more *human*, in its flaws.

It, too, is a canvas upon which a story has been drawn.

Few know that it was meant to be demolished, in the early-1800s. The collective wisdom of the time was that it was a relic of a begone era, that it should be replaced with something more stylish, sleeker. But Victor Hugo saw it differently. He contended that architecture was one of the original modes of expression; to destroy it, in his eyes, would be to speak over it, rewrite it. He wrote *Notre-Dame de Paris* specifically to combat this growing movement, believing himself to have enough clout to save it.

And he was right.

It is hard to imagine, in the current moment, a Parisian skyline without the structure, guarding over the Seine. Though it stands quiet now—with only mere pigeons as its patrons—it feels still significant, protective of its stock.

Painters still line the streets in the shadow of it, to peddle their wares.

I walk down the row, looking to each stand. Some paintings look photo-realistic; others are more avant-garde. But each features the subject of Paris, in one way or another.

I stop at a booth, to survey one artist's work more closely.

Theirs is very stylistic in that the landscapes are all done in black and white, save for one particular item. Sometimes it's a phonebooth or a random roof; often though it's the Eiffel Tower. I'm drawn to one of those: a portrait-style canvas that's only a modicum bigger than the palm of my hand.

The Eiffel Tower is red in it, just off-center to the right: a deep, ruby red.

"Is it expensive?" I ask.

The artist's English is limited, but he gets across easily enough that it is not, considering how small it is. I make the decision then to purchase it, and the man wraps it up for me: with soft white tissue paper and ruby-red bow.

When I slip it into my bag, I feel a warmth in me, somehow: a nostalgia for a place not yet known.

...

I lean the painting against the window in the alcove, when I return. It seems almost proportional there, with how small the glass is.

There's a party of some kind taking place on the floor below me. The floor is pulsing with the music from it; my stomach lurches, remembering the last party I attended.

And yet.

And yet—

I drag an armchair—before beside the coffee table—next to the window, sit there and drum my fingers against my leg.

Right. Laptop.

I dig that out of my bag and set it up, resting my wrists against the edge.

It's something I learned in college: that James Baldwin, having escaped the rampant racism and homophobia in America, wrote in the middle of parties he held at his Parisian flat.

It was the height of fashion: a beautiful black man with a painter as a lover hosting the most raucous functions in town. People would drink and smoke and jump up on tables—and all the while Baldwin would be set up somewhere in the room, stabbing at his typewriter in short, electric bursts.

I'd thought that incredible, at the time. I'd always been a boring sit-down-in-complete-silence-to-write kind of person and couldn't really imagine it in any other way. That Baldwin could keep a consistent thought in all that chaos astounded me.

But perhaps he just needed the outside to be louder than what was within.

I open a new document. Stare at the white of the page.

Look to the bay window. Look to the red of Eiffel Tower, searing in its canvas.

And my fingers find the keys.

iv.

I spend about a half hour circling the Arc de Triomphe.

It's an island all of its own out there: separated from me by about twelve lanes of traffic. I keep looking for a path or a bridge or... *something*. My extremities are cold, fingers turning red from prolonged exposure.

It's on approximately my thirtieth lap that I finally give in.

"What?"

"I can't find a way over there."

I shrug my shoulder at the arc, as though Casper can see it through the phone.

There's silence, from the other end of the line. "What street are you on?" he asks finally.

I tell him.

"All right. Don't move."

Is he really—?

But he hangs up before I can say anything more.

The sun goes down, in the interim. I watch as the sky grow dim, then dark; but the surrounding area never truly does. The fire burning just below the arch sees to that, as well as Avenue des Champs-Élysées from across the way, which is sufficiently lit from a combination of residual Christmas lights, billboards, and marquees.

Casper sidles up to me as I'm studying one of these displays, with great interest.

"You didn't have to come," I say, not looking at him.

"I was only like ten blocks away." But his flushed cheeks attest to something a bit more substantial.

Perhaps he ran.

He takes my hand, before I can even fully register his presence. "Come on," he says, and then we're heading towards the entrance of the subway.

His hand is warm, I think inanely.

It's not a subway entrance at all, I come to realize. Indeed it does lead underground, but it's actually a pathway that serves as entrance to the arc. The hallway is long and stark white, surfaced in such a way that even the most innocuous of noises carry. I hear our feet on the tile: two sets, overlaid so tightly they're hardly distinguishable.

There's someone playing an instrument from further up, but I can't focus long enough to figure out which one.

We breach halfway, just below the arch. It's much bigger close up, though I expect that; still, the whole structure feels massive, underneath. As though it could swallow you up, if it so wished.

I get a better look, then, at the eternal flame: the monument to all the unidentified soldiers of the World Wars. It's guarded heavily, with armed men at every corner—though I wonder why so thoroughly, aside from as an obvious buffer against the wind.

Pride, I suppose. And tradition.

"Serious, aren't they?" Casper comments.

I startle. I'd almost forgotten he was with me. "Yes."

“So—” Casper goes to lean against something, finds he can’t and merely stands. “—what, uh... What did you hope to find, while you were here?”

I don’t know whether he means here—as in below the arc—or *here* here, as in France or on this trip in general, but the distinction matters not. The answer for all three is the same: “I don’t know. The meaning of life... or something?”

“*Pfft*,” he scoffs. “Why bother? Every time I find the meaning of life, it changes.”

I’m struck by that, the concept of it: finding the meaning of life over and over again, having it never be the same. It makes more sense to me than aspiring for ever-elusive “truth,” that may or may not exist.

Perhaps the meaning isn’t the “finding” at all but the searching.

Casper and I duck back underground, emerge on the other side. It’s pitch-black now, but intermittent fairy lights keep us stark relief. We wander—or rather, *I* wander. I get the feeling Casper knows exactly where he is, which is an enviable position.

And we’ve never quite stopped in holding hands, though we’re barely hanging on now: only by the pinkies.

“What happened to us?” he says finally. His eyes are set hard on the ground, illuminated only halfway by the sign of a pizzeria.

I feel my mouth form a flat line. “Do you really want to know?”

“It’s why I asked,” he says.

“It was me—or it was my illness. I was sad... all the time. I was depressing to be around. I didn’t want anyone else to feel like that, so...” I swallow. “I pushed you away.”

“That should have been *my* decision.” He looks at me all at once, with accusation.

“I know.”

“*You—*” He splutters. “*You know?*”

“Yeah.” I pull at my fingers. “Or I know now. I understand now.”

“*You—*” He looks like he wants to be mad at me, just for the sake of it. Like he’s had a lot of anger pent up for a long time and suddenly has no place to put it. “You just—you stopped answering my calls and my texts and didn’t come out when I knocked on your door, and you—what?—suddenly have perfect clarity about the whole thing?”

“Look, I’m saying I was wrong—”

“Hell yeah you were wrong! That’s not the issue here!”

I look at him, slowly. “Are you... mad... that I’ve become a better person?”

He bites into his lip. “Yeah! Kinda!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t—”

“Truly, I am.”

“Fuck—”

“I treated you horribly, and—”

He slaps his hand over my mouth. “Okay, I—” He takes a breath: in through the mouth, out through the nose. “I... I get it. I wasn’t exactly fantastic either, you know? I didn’t give you your space back then, and I’m... I’m being awful right now, and I hate it. So let’s just... call it even and never talk about this again, all right?”

I nod, with his hand still over me.

He removes it once he notices, as though burned.

I bring him home—or rather, the place where I’m staying. I don’t know why I do. It’s more that I went home, and he followed.

And I didn't try to stop him.

"Hm." Casper takes in the room as I close the door behind us, dragging a finger across the surface of the vanity. "It's nice enough, I guess."

I say nothing. I'm already preparing for bed, as though he isn't there. I take off my shoes and socks, one item at a time.

He's drawn to the bay window, like I knew he'd be. He studies the painting I bought for a moment—as though deciding for himself whether or not it was a part of the room's original décor—then slides his attention off the sill, to the chair I'd dragged there: the laptop open, with my notebooks lying across the keys.

He picks them up, ignoring my noise of protest.

"Did you write this recently?" he asks. He flicks a page, with an audible crack.

I reach for him; he merely ducks away. "Yeah, but—"

"It's nothing like how you used to write."

"*I know—*"

"It's good."

I stop reaching. "It's what?"

"It's good. Experimental—and more natural. You sound more yourself."

I can't understand how that's possible, when I don't even know what myself is supposed to sound like.

"It's honest." Now *that* I believe. "It ebbs and flows, like a river."

When I dare to speak, it comes from deep within me: a voice gone unused for so long it feels a stranger. "I didn't write for over a year."

Casper nears drops my notes, in his shock. “A *year*?” He knows what I was like, before. He isn’t familiar with a me that isn’t scribbling into the corners of cocktail napkins, staying up until three in the morning pecking at my keyboard and using every stretch of silence as an opportunity to brainstorm, to dream while I’m awake.

I wasn’t familiar with a me unlike that either, until recently.

“Yeah.”

“You...” Something like understanding ripples across his features. “You really went through it, didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t sure I’d ever write again, to be honest.”

He puts down my notes and opens his arms. “Come here.”

I look at him.

His expression falters, slightly. “If you want, that is...”

I do want.

But I wanted it to be my decision.

His embrace is just as I remember it: all-encompassing. Running hot, like he always does. He still smells like my mother’s detergent, from when he’d borrowed it and switched to it, finding it a superior brand to his own.

The same but different.

I move my head up, from where it’s tucked against his neck. Some whiskers he’d missed from shaving brush against my temple—and then all at once I have my thumb over his lower lip, pulling at the red of it.

His eyes are the greenest I’ve ever seen them.

I lean forward, replace the base of my thumb with my mouth.

I pour myself into him, reacquaint myself with all his many curves and edges. He's got a scar on his upper left lip, from when he hurt himself as a baby; he's got a freckle in the dip of his collarbone, that he likes to cover up. He'd gotten his ears pierced once, let them heal; he has stretch marks on his lower back, from growing too much too fast.

I grasp at him, turn him around onto the bed. He gasps at the fall, the catch of the mattress; I'm on him again within the moment, to share the air between us.

I clutch at his shirt—take it between my fingers and yank at it—because I *have to* see what else is the same about him, what else is different. I have to, or I'll go *mad*—

Casper pulls me away by the hair at my nape, allotting just enough distance to get in a few words. “If you're—” he pants. “If you're doing this under some sense of moral obligation—”

“I'm not,” I say, and I've never been more certain of anything in my life.

He huffs another breath: a blast of heat from before my face. Then his lip dents, with the force of his smirk. “Okay.” He tries to reach for me—roll me over, take control—but I pin him down by the wrists.

And oh, he's got a nice expression then. One I've never seen before. I want more of that; I want to wring the novelties out of him like a wet rag.

I reach for my own shirt then, to tug it up my torso inch by inch.

“Did you get a *tattoo*?” he says, incredulous, when I'm halfway through removing my pants.

I only remember then that he's learning new things about me too.

“Yeah.” I place my foot on the bed, brush fingertips against the ankle as though to confirm it for myself. It’s healed now; the skin no longer feels serpent-like, coarse in its liminal state.

But still the flesh is raised there, the only scar I’ve ever truly wanted.

“I love it,” he says, and that’s all the warning he gives before he drags me back down by the neck to his mouth.

It’s my turn to gasp, and it’s *hot*: thick and wet and sharp with his canine scraping against the edge of my tongue. I still have one pantleg caught around the ball of my foot, but his hands are running a searing path down my back that can’t be ignored.

I reach out to feel for him, just as he goes in to feel for me.

“Ah—” He’s all breath, when it comes to this. Breath and those teeth of his that cut marks into the jut of my shoulder, from where I’m leaning to get my hand around him. He’s got fingers on me too, but it’s secondary: I want to do this for him *for me*.

I want to see the me he sees.

It’s fast and it’s frantic, like my writing from the other day: full of sharp peaks and deep valleys, sensations piling up one on top of the other. By the end, you’re merely left with an overall sentiment, the impression of someone pressed into you bone-deep.

Impactful: That’s what I want to be. In art, in love, in life.

And to be that, I need to here—

—and to be here, I need to be me.

...

He’s denting the mattress, with his weight on it. An elbow in the sheets, wrinkles on his wrist from where he leans.

“Will you keep working on that?” he says while I sort through my papers, playing with the frayed edges of the corners.

“Should I?” I say absently.

“Absolutely.” Casper crawls forward a bit more, hanging one hand off the bed. “I want to learn more about this new you.”

“Hm.” I set the notebooks aside, crawl across the bed. Casper drags me back down by the waist, flips me over to smirk at me from above.

I blink, once. “You’re not going to stay, are you?” It’s not a question, really. I just want to know if I should get dressed now or later.

He huffs out a breath, fond. “No. It was a nice goodbye though.”

“Yeah.”

He hoists himself up, with a grunt. “I’m going to make you breakfast, and then I’m going to leave. Are you all right with that?”

I roll over to my side. “Yes.”

“Okay.” He goes to pad into the next room, but I stop him, with the tone of my voice:

“Casper?”

He turns to look at me, leaning against the doorframe to put on a sock. “Yeah?”

He’s got a bandage on his right ankle, chips of blue polish still on his nails.

“I’m...” I swallow. “I’m glad you’re still you, after all this time.”

He smiles. “I’m glad you’re still you too.”

Months ago, I would have disputed that: thought myself so changed from my ordeal, I could never possibly be me—or ever possibly be me again. But I was always me, in actuality.

Going to school was me; writing like the possessed was me; crying in the doctor's office was me; lying on the kitchen floor was me; wishing that I were gone was me.

But the same could be said for the rest of it too: learning to eat again was me; taking my medications was me; forcing myself out on a walk was me. Each failure, each success: There was only one person to attribute it to.

Each of us comes in seasons—and you wouldn't call winter a different year, just because it was cold. Spring always comes, inevitably.

You just have to be around long enough for the ice to melt.

The Mona Lisa was never finished.

I find most people don't know this. But if you look closely, the mountains in the background are sketchy, vague. They almost certainly wouldn't have been left that way, had Leonardo da Vinci not suffered what was most likely a stroke and become unable to use his right hand for the rest of career.

We never know when this will happen to any of us: sickness, injury. Even death can come swiftly. As creators, we're always pacing the flow of time: fighting off procrastination, beating boredom, trying not to succumb to the siren pull of apathy.

But the trickiest opponent is always yourself.

Painters, actors, writers: We are the emotional crutch of society. We are who people turn to, when they're scared or weary or simply in need of feeling alive. We're the ones who set your heart on fire, to bring light to the dark.

We're the ones who feel on such a level that we can manifest those emotions on a blank page, a blank stage, and surrogate you through a whole other life apart from your own.

When tears spill from your eyes, when your blood pumps through your ears: Know that someone did that for you, that someone had to sacrifice a part of their soul. They gave up time, invested energy.

And some don't even get to finish, before their piece is done.

I wait in line, to get a look at the Mona Lisa up close. Queue behind kids and their grandparents, teenagers who wish to get a picture with it behind them. There's security around it, of course, as it'd already been stolen once before. One woman even threw a cup of coffee on it, for no discernable reason.

Though art does have a way of doing strange things to you.

It's small: hardly surpassing two feet on either side. But it's famous because people say it is, and people say it is because it's famous. Though its artist has long faded from this earth, the art still lingers.

But art is more than marks upon the page. Art is the curling of a finger around the handle of a mug, words whispered so quiet no one hears. It's the shine of someone's eyes when you tell them good news, a "welcome home" when yourself in through the door.

It's every word and every act, every breath we take when walking forward.

So I take one last look at Lisa in her frame—

—and walk away, forward.

Epilogue

I go home to my books. Put some of my souvenirs on the shelves and store the rest in a box. Dust. Restock the fridge. Spend a few days earning back my cat's trust, from having left him in the care of my brother for so long.

Call my brother, meet up with him and apologize for being such an ass. He doesn't care, evidently. Only says that I look tanner—which is bizarre, because it's February. Says that I seem good.

And he's right.

Go to the park. Spread a blanket out under the magnolia trees. Eat fruit that stains the fingers, breads with generous pats of butter. Realize I've picked up some bad habits from travelling but reassure myself that there's worse things.

Write ten words a day. Write twenty. Write a thousand—all at once—in a fit of passion that has me holding out a hand to my year-ago-self, to shake it on the way past.

Buy a succulent in a little glass jar, place it on the windowsill and watch it grow.

...

John Keats had an interesting theory, on where poetry comes from.

He claimed it lies beyond the universe as we know it, in a dimension where everything is perfect, and that when we write poetry—assuming we are doing it *correctly*—we reach into that dimension, to bring out that which already exists. In this way, Keats saw writers more as conduits rather than creators: lightning rods of thoughts beyond the scope of human comprehension.

It's not a new idea. Plato's Theory of Forms touts a similar concept, in which every item in our world has a "perfect" counterpart in the "real world" which we cannot see. That is why—according to him—when we see a chair, we know it is a chair; for there is a perfect chair out there somewhere from which every human has a reference.

I like to think that void exists but not exactly in the way that they describe.

Perhaps this dimension they speak of is real, but it's full of potential rather than finished creations. Perhaps it's teeming with possibilities—prospects, potentials—that have not yet coalesced. Perhaps we as humans take those scattered thoughts, half-formed ideas and make them tangible: with our hands and our hearts, with our effort and our ardor.

God. Brilliance. Inspiration, innovation, invention.

These are what we tend to and watch over, like budding flowers.

These are our muses, that guide us ever on.

Poetics Statement

Abigail Mandlin

The idea for the novel occurred to me sometime towards the end of 2017.

I was taking a creative writing class then, and part of the course required me to keep a personal journal. While keeping this journal, I came upon an idea for a potential novel.

At the beginning, it was a very different concept than what it eventually turned into. The narrative was always going to comprise of a main character disillusioned from the writing world by a nasty bout of mental illness—but instead of going about it in a straightforward kind of way, it leaned more towards the fantastical. It was meant to be more in the “magical realism” vein, in which the protagonist would encounter their “muse” (as in the classical Greek figure) that was assigned to them in much the same way we think of “guardian angels” in Western philosophy. From there, MC and the muse would be at odds, one trying to motivate the other into picking up writing again and the other outright refusing: an “unstoppable force” vs. “immovable object,” if you will. But somewhere in the process of plotting, the fantastical elements were slowly phased out.

Perhaps it was me wishing to be more realistic with myself. The novel was always supposed to be a “bookend” of sorts, to a particular chapter in my life: a final farewell to a part of my life I much preferred to forget. But I found in writing, the opposite was often the effect: I was reliving it instead.

This was sometimes a good thing and sometimes not.

It was a struggle, from day one. No—it was a struggle from negative day thirty-seven.

Travelling was always a part of the book. But me *physically* travelling to these places was not. The idea to take a more active approach in my research occurred to me just as I was starting to piece together what my thesis would be—and when I pitched the concept to the program, I honestly didn't know what to expect as an answer. But I ended up getting the A-okay, which was both what I wanted and what I secretly had hoped would be turned down.

A large part of me *did* want to travel. I very much enjoy going to new places and learning new things. But on the other hand, I have a not-insignificant fear of flying as well as generalized anxiety. But I was doing well at that time, I thought. I'd recently gone off my anxiety medication and seemed fine enough. And it's not as though this was my first time going out of the country; two years before, I'd studied abroad in Japan for a whole summer. And aside from one minor hiccup, the trip had been a total success, so who was to say I couldn't do it again?

And besides, when would I ever get another opportunity like this?

So my bizarre multi-continent spirit journey was born.

But as I mentioned previously, it turned bad from basically from the word "go."

I was ill the entire flight(s) to my first destination: terrible stomach pain, shaking, insomnia, nausea, unceasing anxiety attacks, the works. And it didn't improve, really. Oh, there were ups and downs, sure. Some days I could muster the strength to explore and do what I was meant to do; some days I even had *fun*. But most of the time I was suffering in one way or another. I could eat hardly at all; I lost ten pounds in three weeks. I could barely sleep and had trouble breathing, both awake and not. My stomach was in constant turmoil basically beginning to end.

And then... the Incident™.

I was on the Greek island of Mykonos, with my father who'd come to visit. I'd just recently gone back on the anxiety medication, deciding I needed it to continue my trip. But what most people who are familiar with these kinds of things know is that the first week on serotonin inhibitors is the absolute *worst*. You have all your worst side effects then—and some more serious than others.

It had been a nice day, actually, the one before. I'd finally started to eat again like a normal human and had only felt a touch anxious. Compared to the last few weeks, it'd been an absolute dream.

But honestly, a dream was the last thing I needed at the moment.

I'd been sleeping. Not soundly, because I hadn't known sound sleep for a while now. But sleeping. And I was having a dream in which paint was being poured over me, covering every orifice.

It was spreading slow. Oh-so slow. And I couldn't move to hurry the process along. Only wait. Only stay perfectly still on my back, until every inch of my body was coated.

And I wasn't allowed to breathe until then, either.

It was agony. The paint was all over me now, but still spreading down to my thighs and feet. I needed to get the paint on me *now*. I needed to *breathe*.

I struggled to move, to get my hands all over it so I could live.

And then I woke up, gasping.

It still didn't feel like I was breathing. It felt like there was a weight over my chest, like I was trying to breathe water instead of air.

I began to hyperventilate; my whole body began to work up a tremor, and tears ran down my face unceasing.

My dad was just beside me—just beside me and sleeping. And for some reason, I didn't want to disturb him with this nonsense.

So I called my mom, who was still on the other side of the world.

I didn't expect the call to go through. Coverage was spotty, on the Aegean Sea. And who knew if she'd answer? She was probably busy.

But she answered all the same.

My choking sob woke up my father.

They talked to me, from both sides: my mother's voice in my ear, my dad's beside me. The latter held me, rocked me like a child. The former tried to talk sense to me, get me to explain what was wrong.

But there was no good explanation.

Though I still don't entirely know what this was, it was most likely a side effect of the Zoloft: vivid dreams, delusions, psychosis manifested from some of my greatest fears. This was the low point of my travel experience.

But it didn't get better immediately.

The next day was hell. I hadn't slept. I was too afraid to. We—my father and I—were meant to get on a ferry to the island of Santorini, which we did. We sat by the port, on freezing cold concrete. I looked out into the sea and weighed the pros and cons of walking off the pier, to drown myself and end my suffering for good.

I decided against it, in the end. But only because the water wasn't that deep and I reasoned I'd only get wet and cold and not die, ultimately.

So we went on.

I don't remember much of the days after that. I was in a daze. Nothing felt real to me—or else felt too real. I only knew pain and deep sadness; I couldn't eat, I forced myself not to sleep. I feared every time I blinked that I'd be right back there in that horrible dream.

My dad and I tried to get me a flight back home, but from where we were, it was nearly impossible; it would take many planes, many delays. I'd have to travel through the Middle East—and all alone too. I was obviously in no state to do something like that.

But I happened to already have a ticket to London for the next day. And I could easily get to America from there, right?

So the decision was made.

Flying that day was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. It's as though my whole body rejected the idea. My skin wanted to slither off me; my insides wanted to escape through my mouth. I wrote in my journal, which I'd told my academic advisor I'd keep, and tried to catalogue the experience, but the words would barely come.

I was a husk of a human, by this point.

But once in England, I felt like I could breathe again. The air was crisp and cold; I didn't eat much and slept even less, but it was still an improvement. My mom met me at the hotel the next day, and I suddenly felt like myself again.

And then I got violently ill.

But like... normal ill. Cold ill. Flu ill...? Whatever it was, it was an illness I could work with. This wasn't uncharted territory; this was something remedied by throat lozenges and Advil. I could live through this, easily.

And after that, everything was fine.

I went back to eating. I went back to sleeping. I still did both tentatively, like a dog who'd been hit every time they barked and wasn't yet sure if it was safe to do so or not. But whimpers became growls became woofs became howls. I rebuilt my strength; I began to enjoy my time.

Compared to Greece, England and France was a breeze.

I returned home on a good note.

(But not before going through a harrowing experience on Air France, of which is detailed in my book.)

(But I lived, so there.)

Then I went to work.

It was slow at first. I felt it almost necessary to take time to recover from my ordeal. I visited a doctor almost immediately, to get assessed. I still slept with one eye metaphorically open, still choked occasionally while I ate. But gradually, I began to whittle away at my thesis, building up the narrative I'd been constructing in my mind for years.

I wrote mostly in the dead of night. I was writing from home—by which I mean my family's home, with my dad and my mom and my little brother. There's always noise in the house: my parents taking calls, my brother practicing the saxophone, people watching loud movies, listening to music, vacuuming, the dog barking at the landscapers. It was endless—and hard to grab a consistent string of silence. I need to concentrate when I'm writing, which requires quiet. This is why I turned to writing at night, from my bed. I'd construct a little blanket cocoon and peck at my keyboard. My peak writing hours became midnight to five AM, which I don't recommend usually but became a requirement for me. My sleep schedule is still suffering for it, but I managed to get the job done, as you can see.

More in the realm of characters, the protagonist is me but also not me, I tell people. They're definitely based off me—but more so my internal thoughts rather than how I actually interact with people out loud. The people in the novel are also based off real people: Arianna is the real tour guide I met in Greece, though her personality is somewhat changed; Professor Mukashi is based off my first Japanese professor, a man I still think of very fondly; Landon and Kate are shamelessly taken from Jensen and Cat, my real-life cousin and his girlfriend (who do in fact live in New York and work in the theater industry); and Casper is the culmination of a lot of people—but mostly a friend of mine who I did in actuality push away when I was depressed, though we've reconciled since then.

(Jane and Lulu are the only characters who I made up entirely from thin air. I never met anyone like them in London, though I wish I had. Their names do come from real people, however, but they've been altered slightly to “protect the innocent,” as it were.)

The tone of the novel came about rather naturally, though I did struggle briefly at the beginning whether to write it in first-person or third. After that though, it wasn't much trouble. I tried to keep it as honest as I could (as close to real life, I mean) with little sprinkles of humor here and there, to keep it from being too depressing. I wanted it to seem journal-esque, without being an actual journal (which is why they often end or begin sentences with “I think” or “I reason,” etc.) And since the main character is much like myself in that they're well-read and introspective, their voice came to me without much effort.

As for literary works that inspired the piece, a few come to mind:

The first—and arguably most important—was the letters of John Keats, which I read as a senior in an undergrad class called “the history of literary criticism and theory.” For the life of me, I wish I know which ones I read so I could cite them directly, but I cannot seem to locate the

exact ones. Internet sleuthing has only turned up the fact that there are hundreds—if not thousands—of Keats letters, and I am only one person. Given enough time, I may be able to find them, but the important thing is this: In one of Keats' letters, he put forward the notion that poetry comes from the ether and that poets are mere conduits of this. And it was this idea that originally inspired my story, as it was such an interesting concept to me.

The next piece of media is Greek myths, especially the ones featured in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. I had already read both in high school, but when I was drafting my story together and realizing Greece had to be my main character's first destination, I delved into it much deeper. I picked up *Classical Mythology* by Helen A. Guerber from my local bookstore, which has an excellent overview of the Greek myths. (It also features some lovely full-color art pieces based off said myths, which is a huge bonus.) I read this in my off-time at work between meetings during my first year in grad school as thesis preparation, and I'm very glad I did; it prepared me well to have a good basis of understanding when I actually went to Greece the following year.

As for pieces that inspired the *style* of my book more than anything, look no further than *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The reason I cite this work in particular is that I knew from the start that my protagonist was going to be very Nick Carraway-esque, in that they would mostly be an observer but would ultimately be affected by the people and the events around them. My MC also inherited some of Carraway's dry wit, which I thought was crucial to the balancing of the tone in the book.

Next we have *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder. Both story and author hail all the way from the frigid land of Norway, and by my research, the book has been translated into over forty different languages since its original publication in the early 1900s. I did not find this book on my own; on the contrary, it was required reading material for my tenth grade language arts class.

But I'm so glad that it was, because I've never forgotten it. This book leans towards the outlandish; what originally seems to be a straight-forward narrative about a young girl navigating everyday life turns towards the fantastical when she meets an older man who begins to tutor her on the subject of philosophy. From there, the story unravels—until the characters realize they're part of a book and attempt a daring escape from the pages. What I took from this story was its structure: how there are two narratives here, that being of the main character and their day-to-day life alongside the information they're learning along the way, and thus, passing on to the reader. I tried to do something similar in *Muses*, by intertwining literary study and discovery with the main character's arc and personal journey. I did it a little differently than Gaarder, in not separating the narratives as much as he did, but the idea was still based off his, originally. Therefore, he and his story are one of my novel's great inspirations in terms of structure.

The last piece I'll discuss is *Looking for Alaska* by John Green. I'm biased, as this is one of my all-time favorite books, but I think it's a work of genius—*especially* the last few pages. Endings are hard, and oftentimes people can stumble in trying to wrap up a narrative. But Green absolutely stuck the landing with *Looking for Alaska*. The book ends with the main character writing an essay for a class on what he thinks happens when people die. Throughout this essay, he shows amazing growth as a character, reflecting on all the events that have happened throughout the book and ultimately finding—if not happiness—closure. And that's what I wanted for my main character in *Muses*: I wanted them to find the strength to move on, despite what they've been through. In that way, *Looking for Alaska* was basically my template for how to end my own book; and I'd imagine if you laid out my ending and Green's, they'd look very similar. They're both stories that call for introspection, and thus, I felt it appropriate that both deliver it in similar ways.

There are probably more works I could point to, in listing inspirations, but the ones I've listed above are simply the ones that most come to mind. I had a lot of difficulty in finishing the thesis—mostly in the research department, though there was some struggle in the writing process as well—but I'd say the main hardship of it all was just motivating myself to dredge up all these memories and experiences that—as I said previously—I mostly would have rather left in the past.

But it needed to be done.

And now it is—done, I mean. I can still hardly believe it. I'm impressed with what I've accomplished, in more ways than one. I'm in a much better place now, though I'm still struggling. I may always struggle, and there's no shame in that. Mental health is a journey, not a destination, and I think I've demonstrated that well in both my book and in my life.