

Ash Cinema

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Part One

The ghosts were a pre-existing condition. No one likes to hear that and most never believed me but even still they're with me. Maybe even worse than before.

Today I watched the sun drip from the sky, right into the skyline and then on into the ocean. It didn't stop but just kept dripping. Dripped onto everything, into everything. Into me. Like watching water trace a path down a pane of glass, the sun was red, a furious shade, but the color began to drip, fall off, and it wound its way to the skyline where it turned the tops of buildings red then ran down their side into the ocean at the horizon, spreading like a ripple through the water. The waves carried it back to the shore and far out to sea until the red touched every corner of water like all the blood of the past had been collected in the sky and poured into the ocean until, to the very depths, the blood of those billions gone before covered every molecule of oceanwater. The sky didn't turn red, though, not like here below. And, like I said, nothing was spared. I watched

the sun, that big spiteful disk, turn and hover right above me on the balcony. A single line as if it were hanging down saliva from its lips the way we used to do when we were kids. I kept waiting for it to suck it back up and pull the red from the world but it didn't. It dripped right on into my mouth. It was cold and stung like shards of glass were pouring into me or like I swallowed a gallon of bees and I felt the cold hit me in the center, here, right above the navel, and start spreading out the way it spread through the ocean. Looking out over the city, the red was moving fast, climbing over cars, running up walls, sliding down stairwells. The city stained red, a coldness coming. I could barely move my body, my hands frozen to the railing of the balcony. Watching my breath condense in front of me I remembered him. Never had I felt so alone as the last time I saw him, his body gone cold and his eyes gone vacant. I thought maybe he was coming back for me or was reaching out to me through the sun but didn't know where I was or how to find me so he just cast himself in all directions. Maybe now that he was inside me again, that he found me, he'd collect himself, all the red, and come to me, fill me up the way he used to, maybe then I'd feel warm, but he didn't. Or maybe it was never him. The ocean reminds me of him, though, and I know, if he finds me again, he'll come from the ocean.

They do studies now, ways to communicate with the past, Creation Compositions. If you reach out they'll feel you and they can find you. Hansel and Gretel dropped breadcrumbs and it's kind of like that. After what happened earlier, I thought, maybe, yeah, I'll try it.

It's not that I wanted to forget but that I didn't want to remember. Life leaves holes in you and remembering too much or dwelling too much is kind of like how kids play with a hole, accidentally filling it up or making it bigger. I never want to lose it but too much and it may be me who gets lost.



Delicate hands, alarmingly small, clutching at my dress in the dark, pawing my breasts, fingers between my legs and I was ready. I can smell you, he said, and I was already moaning but trying not to. He was vulgar sometimes like that. I hated it but, now.

He was too big for me at first but just about anyone would've been then. Probably thought I was much older, too. Forty years my senior but it never felt that way. Never felt wrong or out of place.

'I'm going to hell for this.' His hand brushed through my hair, his other cradling my chin.

'You know how people say you're only as old as you feel?' The hair of his chest was grey and curly, thick. His torso covered in a pelt of down, I slept clinging to him, my head on his stomach. He liked that. 'If you're only as old as you feel than I'm the adult here.'

A conversation we had often. It made him laugh, his belly bubbling, his shoulders bouncing, and his head thrown back. No sound, a silent laughter, his eyes closed, the wrinkles carved deep into his face, crevices from his eyes past his cheeks falling in line with the canyons caused by his smile. My whole foot fit in his mouth. He liked that, too.



That's not where this started, though. I was on my own when we met and had been for maybe too long. I won't bore you with what came before. I left home when I was fifteen.

Maybe everyone died, my whole family, a big fire. It was Christmas Eve, the tree, a real one, was covered with all kinds of ornaments: tinsel, gingerbread men, three kings,

sleighs, bells, mistletoes, Santas and Mrs Clauses, a few elves, all colors of lights, the big ones, bulbs that fit in your palm, not those tiny pointy ones that never really made any light. I counted the presents underneath, seven for me, seven for my sister. We wanted a dog, pleaded for one for months, but it didn't look like we were getting one that year. Even still, it was Christmas. We were so excited and there was no way we could sleep. Mom and dad told us around midnight that we needed to get to bed. We shared a room so we lied there in the dark whispering to one another. She was eleven so Christmas was still a big deal to her, not that I had outgrown it, because I never really have, but, being older, it seemed the part I was to play, not caring as much, but, when it was just us two in the dark, I let loose. She loved that about me, my sister. She wanted to know everything about life, about sex and boys, and that's where we shared it all, whispering our lives back and forth across the black space in our room. I think I usually fell asleep first but sometimes it was her, still mumbling questions in her sleep. That was a game, too, getting the other to talk to you through their dreams. It worked sometimes, that is, if we believed the other. Dreamtalk's like nothing else, the things people say, a mix of reality, imaginary, an answer to your question, and words that mean so little they have to be important. I didn't sleep that night and I guess most

people in the neighborhood didn't either, but that was my fault. Maybe it was an electrical fire or those lights on the tree just burnt it right up but the tree was definitely the start of it. Makes me glad we didn't have a dog under there because my conscience couldn't handle a puppy on top of everything else.

Or maybe my daddy molested me. It started back when I was young enough to think it was a game but old enough to know I was feeling something important, something beyond words and my small world at the time. At first it was just kisses in the wrong places when he was supposed to be reading me a story, my mom just across the hall with my sister. My sister slept with them until she died too young. At least she was spared the indignity. Bright side, sometimes it's all that keeps me going. After she died, though, there was a lot more than kisses and my childsize laughter. Sometimes I'd say No, tell him it hurt, But I love you, he'd say, his face sincere and sad. Can't I love my daughter? Being young, it doesn't feel the way it does later. I didn't think about it the way I think about it now, either. Mom never knew so maybe she's not to blame but it's not that easy. Ignorance doesn't deserve absolution. He'd come into bed later. I played with his hair and laughed at him and how he was jealous of boys in my class. Do you like him, he'd say, Do you like him more than me? I loved

him as my daddy and maybe more than that. I didn't know. Don't know. Inappropriate doesn't enter a relationship from within but from without. I thought it was normal but I knew it wasn't, that there was something different about my daddy, the way he looked at my friends and not at my mom. I got older, my body changed early, but it never slowed him down. His appetite grew but I didn't want him as my lover anymore. I just wanted my daddy. Everyone outgrows their parents and I was no exception. It hurt him and he came into my room every night, sometimes crying, You don't love me anymore. I held him, my hand through his hair, but I didn't say anything, just pushed away his hands that reached everywhere. I saw him, then, for what he was, a sad despicable man. So I left.

Or maybe I never had a family, grew up in an orphanage. Maybe I killed the whole lot. It doesn't matter which you believe or even which happened. Where the story begins is here, with me all alone riding a bus west because it's better to run from the sun in the morning and chase it at night than the other way around.



The ghosts, though. Those've always been with me. Talking to shadows, playing with phantoms, that's what matters about my childhood. It wasn't that I was imaginative or anything like that. They were with me, really. Not an imaginary friend but a real one, a long dead one that came back to where she grew up only to find another little girl that knew she was there. The ghosts, they told me secrets about their lives, the things they were too afraid or too ashamed to let be known in their living life.

Delilah came to me often. Born blind, she preferred being a ghost.

I can see everything now, she said, Even the things no one else can.

She never told me what those unseeable things were that she was watching but that image sticks with me.

She died when she was barely three, drown in the bathtub. At least that's what she told me. Her ghost looked older than that but she said ghosts could look like anything they wanted to because ghosts can't be seen by the living.

'I'm alive.'

You just think you're alive, she said.

After that, I avoided Delilah. Not so much because she scared me but because she was a liar.

Mrs Dolier was my favorite ghost. She was lost and trying to find her way back home.

I know he misses me, she said. Her husband was still alive, or at least she believed he was. She hadn't seen him in ages and, she said, If he was dead then we'd be together by now. I didn't think death worked like that but I was just a girl then with kneescrapes and dirty hair. She was from Delaware but I didn't know where that was. I showed her maps but she said the world of the dead doesn't look like maps and charts. It looks like caves and meadows, lights and darks, cold and warms, assonance and dissonance.

'How'd you get so lost?'

I don't know, dear, she said, Nothing looks the same once you die.

I always thought she was afraid of her past. Being dead suited her. She was kind.

Ghosts are hard to explain. None are the same and I can't really see them. Not with eyes. But I know where they are. Taste them, even, in the air.

Every star is tied to a person. There're so many because each one is for a newly dead person. Their life slips from their body, binds to the birth of a star, and watches over everything. Shooting stars, no one's been able to explain that to me. Same with supernovas or blackholes but those must mean something. If ghosts can die they don't like to talk about it. Rooms darken when I bring it up, how one stops being a ghost. Sensitive area, I guess.

I watch the sky often, even when it's not dripping into the earth. I search for his star because I should recognize it. Something about its glow or its place amongst the others should make him appear to me. I draw him in the sky with my eyes instead hoping that one of the many dots I connect will be his and will maybe, I don't know, glitter extra bright to let me know he still thinks about me and is looking for me.

Ghosts are like people, both good and bad, angry and sad, confused and crazy. Something about dying turns them, makes them, I don't know, malevolent. Sometimes it's just the way they lie or the things they don't tell you. But some of them, the ones who've been dead too long, spent too much time away from the living, they grow jealous, angry with those who are alive and, well, everyone's heard of hauntings and all that.

That's another reason I went west. Ghosts, for some reason, are always heading east.



When I close my eyes he's here with me. In my bed, wrapped around me, he massages my breasts and kisses my neck. He smells like damp basement, musk and

mold, the sweetness of his house, of all those dying books, of all the rotting carpets, and I can't open my eyes. He explored me with his tongue and his hands memorizing every inch, tasting every orifice, every sweatgland.

I'm his and always have been, even before I knew him, from the first time I laid eyes on his work, when I finally saw him drinking coffee by himself, unnoticed, alone, his face long and puffy. He was the walking dead, swollen red nose, dark heavy bagged eyes, white hair that somehow kept its lustre. He adjusted his glasses, wiped off the fog caused by steam, and drank such small sips, afraid to burn his tongue. He was sensitive of his tongue, always.

'It's my greatest organ,' his yellow toothed smile that stretched from sunrise to sunset. It really was.

'I have not smiled like this in years, my dear,' he said after the first time, 'I was afraid I'd forgotten how.'



I never had a destination in mind the whole time. I just went and figured I would know when I got there. I'd step off the bus and think, Yeah, this is the place. I thought of my whole life as a dream then, the ghosts, the past, just something I was waiting to awake from, and when I woke

up I'd be able to dry the tears, wash away the hauntings of the dead and the living. Of course, life isn't like that.

I also discovered that a bus won't take you in any one direction forever. I got off and the dream didn't end but instead solidified and became more real. There was no escape from my life despite distance.

I lived in libraries then. As long as I didn't fall asleep for too long or stink too much I could stay and no one questioned it. Still fifteen but maybe passing for eighteen, the librarians never said anything. I think they knew, the way they looked at me and smiled, tighteyed and closelipped. I read things at first, just picking up anything from the fiction section and reading until I got bored. I found some good things, Rimbaud, especially. Everyone has those eye opening moments in life and I think Rimbaud was a big one for me. Discovering the power of words, the beauty of images, and the art of life. I loved him, in a way, for writing the way he did, for writing what he did. He was reckless and in love. Not in love with any one person, but in love with life, with poetry maybe. He grew in the hours I spent huddled under bridges trying to not be touched or grabbed. If I was lucky I was able to hide in the library and stay over night. Other nights, though, I risked the outside, dreading the tumbling sun and what came after.

There was a cast of characters to this time but they were constantly shifting, here one day, on a bus to San Francisco the next, but this isn't about them. I'd like to say there was a trick to staying safe but there wasn't. The trick was trying to find anywhere to sleep undisturbed. It usually helped to find an older woman and hold onto her. When I couldn't, I would leave my body behind and drift with the drunken boat, tying garlands from steeples to stars, dancing across the sky, forgetting the heavy hands and clumsy writhing and the fetid reek of shit or the way the ocean stank of dead fish.

The ocean's where the dead collect. Ghosts are born here, I think, and that's why they head east, to escape the beginning they don't want to remember. Even in death there's no escape from the past but that doesn't stop them from trying.

Listening to music at the library got me through. Better than food most days and cheaper. When the only things to sell comes at a dangerous price I found I could do without a lot of things. I stole from the librarians sometimes, though, when I was desperate. They let me. I know they did and it made me hate myself more but it didn't stop me.

The music section was primarily classical. A lot of pianos and violins and the like. I didn't know what people listened to outside in the real world because I never had a

radio and the things the library had weren't what I wanted to listen to. I spent a lot of time at first just flicking through cases, lots of pictures of men with white hair or ballet dancers. I stopped one day on this image of a silhouetted woman. It reminded me of Virginia Woolf and how I pictured her writing *To the Lighthouse*, her hands clasped staring out to sea. Symphony No. 3 was all it said on the cover and the back told me it was by Henryk Gorecki. I pulled it out and played it on one of the CD players they checked out.

It begins by not beginning. Silence that lasted long enough for me to check twice to make sure it was playing. Slowly, as if far away, the music begins, deep and resonant, building as if reaching out across the soundscape to take me. The rising strings, mournful, weaving back and forth and into, the ebb and flow as if waves of sorrow washed into me. I was motionless, caught, and, though my eyes were open, the entire world was slipping from me, not crashing down, but drowning out under this tide of death, but not an angry or violent death. A graceful and beautiful death. My death, happening with the constantly rising strings, the violins and cellos and basses climbing higher and higher, overcoming peaks on their way to me, to wrap all round me and swallow everything, my life, my past, my future, my present. The strings are not just the death but

the lament of the living, of those left behind, the mourners that sing with their colossal strings. It found me, collected me, and carried me higher and higher until I no longer felt earth below my feet or sky above my head. I was in a vast ocean of noise, thousands of hands touching me, reaching for me, an ocean of sorrow that I walked on as if some deistic powers were granted and then the strings began to recede and the hands that held me fell limp and I was alone in a great open space staring into the infinite, into nothing and no one. And I felt my body begin to collapse, start to fall in on itself, and then the piano key hit, softly, and the soundscape changed, the vast absence filled by a low resonance and then a voice. A voice singing in a language I could never understand but it spoke to me so purely and I felt my body swept up by the rising ocean again, the strings returning, the voice lifting, piercing through the void and letting the smallest glimmer of light through, and then receding once more, the tide at midnight, the moon breathing through the clouds, a softness, elegance touching my body, holding me. The clouds returned and the swell of strings and voice broke high, battering against the cliffs that erupted from the earth with the tears of those violins. The tears that lasted forever though they were barely there. My body filled with their tears, with the beautiful anguished voice from the piercing cries. There

was nothing solid, all things in flux, fluid and dynamic, but there was a system, a cycle like a storm that came violently and left staining the world with its pain. Then, as slowly as it came, everything disappeared as if the doleful storm has come full circle. The funeral march ended, the body brought to rest, and I stood there afraid to move, hardly breathing, my knuckles white against the CD player that I thought would snap. Alone, more alone than ever before. I sat down and put the CD player on the table leaving the headphones. I thought hours had passed but the player read twenty five minutes and kept counting but the sound emptied so fully that I thought once again that it was over.

The sound returns as if breathed into me. The immense absence replaced by tranquillity, a field high in mountains, the breeze light and cool. It shifts quickly, dark clouds and a far away singing, the same sorrowful woman caught with me in the storm. The field becomes ominous, impending rain, I can smell it, feel it, but the sky waits for her, for the signal she'll certainly give. The voice, though, grows, softens, almost motherly, the strings fill her wings and spread warmth once more, the clouds drifting apart, the sun sighing, her voice breaking, protecting me. She reaches high, so high, followed in every movement by the strings as if they are at her command. I see her, the tears in her eyes, her arm stretched to the sky, and the tears streak my

face, and I wipe them away but they keep coming. Then the breeze again to dry my eyes, her song to lighten the sky. Her voice, so aching, so strong, so perfectly complemented by the arrangement, the tears return and I don't even bother to wipe them anymore but let them fall to the table, my shoulders slouched, and I hold myself, trying to keep myself warm. Alone again but with her. And I realise it's her that's alone, the way her voice trails and loses itself in the emptiness, far away on her own mountain meadow, crying into the canyons. Lost, she's lost so much. Everything. Alone, so alone and empty, the arrangement slips out of existence again when her voice goes silent and I see her crumbling into the mountain, becoming the very place that she stood. All that she was disappears into nothing. Nothing.

And I can't stop crying even now listening to it.

But the music returns, the strings waving, slight piano touches, creating a surface, a place for her to stand, for me to stand with her, in place of her, or maybe the other way round. Her voice, strong and full again, but still sorrowful, lonesome. Like the tide once more, growing and falling, the piano, each touch spaced out, keeping the motion of the ocean in place. Swelling, a gradual rise, subtle but felt. Her voice louder, but not carried by the instruments this time, standing alone by herself, piercing as high as

they can, fighting the emptiness, the vast absence. Alone. She fights alone challenging the enclosing space, the tide that drags behind her, the recession of instrumental expression. She's more alone than ever before but fighting more fully, with less tears and more determination. But it's evaporating and she returns pulling the instruments up behind her, now carrying the strings instead of the other way. Follow my voice, she sings, follow me to the great heights. With all of her strength, she heaves and pulls, fights the abandonment. The strings stay at kneeheight in repose, shimmering, fluctuating side to side, parabolically. She covers her head and drops her hands, then the floor gives out, the piano keys rise. Raising her hands to her breast then upward, her voice comes alive, shrugging off the pull and weight of death, stretching, reaching, groping after those piano keys, those notes that rise so high, pushing the clouds apart and caressing the glowing moon that bathes her face. Ecstatically, alone, but alive, stronger, brighter, more powerful than before. The keys press on, higher and higher, and she follows them with grace. Her song, full of life. The ghosts fall from her and she follows a path of her creation from her isolation into the world beyond. Silent now, at peace, her face serene, the keys build a stairway and she takes each step forward. And then there is nothing for a moment as if time has passed and then she

returns, the clouds heavy, her steps slow and deliberate. Not following a path to life, but a path to death. Her voice strong but low, the piano leading her down, further and further. The isolation, the loneliness, it surrounds and shrouds her. Eyes at her feet, each step dragging her closer to death. And then she stops, the sound spreading, a light glows, rising. She walks on falling into the light.

I cried then. Cried until the librarian took the headphones from my head and pressed my face to her chest. I clung to her for I don't know how long but I was asleep on one of the couches, my eyes ragged and my pants bunched up. I sat up and walked back to the CDs and pulled Symphony No. 3 out again staring at the cover. The image made perfect sense to me and the tears rose to the back of my throat and just barely spilled over my eyelids. A woman alone, silhouetted, a ghost, her journey from here to there and back. My first true experience of loneliness and what it meant to be alone came that day. I played it again and again and again watching the sun go from noon to gone, my tears falling until I was thirsty.



He taught me most of what I know about music. He loved Debussy and Satie, Wagner and Prokofiev, but was especially fond of Pärt and Glass. I remember lying in the dark with him, Spiegel im Spiegel giving texture to the room.

'I've been listening to this since before you were born.'
His breath came slow, on the precipice of dreams.

'You've spent more time asleep than I have alive.'

His silent laughter, 'That's probably true.' His voice was lower when he was falling asleep like he talked at the bottom of a lake and only the ripples reached my head pressed to his stomach. The violin, not crying, but breathing, exhaling and inhaling existence. Life captured between the tightrope that binds piano to violin.

I sat up and sidled into him, my head on his shoulder, taking in the scent of his armpit, the sweat and musk that saturated every room of his house. 'What does this remind you of?'

'Hm.' His eyes opened and he woke a little so as to converse in the realm of the waking. 'I get caught remembering a lot of things when I'm alone. Things I don't like to remember but don't want to forget.'

'Other women?' I twirled his grey chest hairs between my fingers.

'Yes. Older women, mostly.'

'Did you love them?'

He exhaled through his nose, 'Sometimes I think I loved them all.'

'But you don't believe that?'

'Heh, no. No, if I loved any of them, it was only one.'

'Tell me about her.'

'You know about her.'

'I know. But I like to know. I like hearing about you. You become so different in reverie.'

'Reverie, eh?'

'I'm still young enough to learn new words. Now, tell me.'

He laughed, his chest rose with a big inhale, the kind of inhale that could keep me inside him. That's how he breathed, hugely, and I tried, when he did, to get as much of me inside as possible, so I could always be with him, so he would take me with him, even after death, I'd be inside him. He'd smell me, feel me, so he could find his way home, to me. 'Genevieve. I met her a long time ago. I was older than you are now, just out of high school when I met her. She was a local painter of some repute, had been on the circuit for fifteen years already. There was a mural competition in town and I went to film it. It ended up being in my first film, the one you saw at the library, but you know that. She, Genevieve, god, she was beautiful. Short

black hair, skin pale as porcelain, high cheekbones, square jaw, and greeneyes. Irish, full blood, even born there. She came to america around the time I was born and she was ready to start her career.

'I don't know why I went there to film a painting competition. I never knew, but back then it didn't matter what I filmed. I just had to film things. Nothing could be more boring than watching someone paint, which I didn't realize until about an hour into it. An hour had passed but it looked as if they had only started, which they had. They don't do painting competitions like that anymore but it was a different world then. People read poetry to each other, painted in public, sang and danced. It was a bohemian life, the kind Godard hinted at and Rimbaud exemplified. The French were always good at that sort of thing, being artists. So, I'm filming this and realizing it's going nowhere. I was set far enough back to see everyone and would adjust my focus on one painter for a while then switch and so on. Well, needless to say I was bored and knew anyone else would be bored, too, but, instead of going home, I picked an artist, Genevieve, and focused solely on her. Why I picked her, heh, I wish I could say there was some deep meaning buried at the core of me but it was because I had never seen anyone so pretty. Even covered with paint, she was angelic.

'Anyway, I folded up my tripod and decided to hold the camera, a Super 8. I asked her if it was okay if I filmed her. She scowled at me, mouth open only just, disgusted. That was her response. Well, that and she launched paint over my head onto the wall she was working on. I figured I didn't need her permission, so I started filming. I moved slowly to keep the image steady. Concentric circles around her capturing not just the mural in progress but also her. Mostly her. I followed the violent gestures of her arm, the contortions of her face, the smiles, the way she wiped her face and left paint there. Her body moved electrically, charged with energy. There was a violence, a chaos to her, and it showed in her work. Abstract but also with a keen eye to form and an angry yet beautiful aesthetic. The image was of three women, I think. I don't even remember anymore it's been so long. So long even since I've watched my movies. But the bodies were made with a mix of motherly tenderness and petulance, abhorrence. She loved her art but wanted to destroy it. It was evident in her every movement, not just while she was painting, but even when she wasn't. I captured all of this, the process more than the product itself. I told the story of her mind by watching her body and she spoke to me in the language of arms and legs rather than words. Without that, my career never would've happened the way it did. I probably would've been making

films like everyone else and I'd still have work, or at least funding.'

I pressed my cheek to his, the cool hairs of his beard brushed my cheek, and I kissed him, his warm lips like a river between the jungle of his greybeard. Then, his eyelids, I kissed them and his forehead, his ears, his neck. 'What happened next?' I moved further down his body while he talked, feeling the warmth travel down him into his penis pressing against me.

His hands in my hair, I could feel his gentle movements, his hips, his back. 'I filmed her until she was done. Two days of filming from morning to night. I caught everything, the cigarettes she smoked during her breaks, the way she stubbed them out, how her eyes avoided me, all the food she didn't eat, all the drinks she didn't drink. Just tea with her, always. I spent weeks editing it and ended up with a thirty minute montage of her at the competition only accompanied by the three versions of Spiegel im Spiegel. I made it all fit together, cut it all up, made it into something it wasn't meant to be. I stopped caring about time, how this happened before this or that happened before that. I made an exploration of her mind, of her body, and I took the beginnings and ends and middles and mixed them up, tied them all together, and created what is now left to the world. The curves of her legs, the

hairs on her arms, the quivering of her lip when she spent an hour crying after the competition ended. I can't even remember if any footage of the actual mural made it into the film. I didn't care anymore. What matters was the song and the body. I wanted to capture her. Her very essence, her life force, all of her violence and bombast, and then layer it onto this, this gentleness, this tranquillity that I saw in her when she collapsed. She lost the competition but I found where she lived and went to her house.

He was hard and I knew he was struggling but I teased him, drew him out, blowing on his penis, putting it in my mouth for only an instant, then withdrawing, kissing his thighs, caressing his balls, moving up and putting his penis against my stomach, touching it with my inner thigh, but never allowing him inside, even though his hips quivered, trying to find me. He could smell me, how wet I was, because he always knew. He controlled his breathing and continued even though he suffered so, his voice getting higher with every passing minute. 'She wouldn't let me in at first but eventually she opened the door and let me show her what I had done. In silence, she watched the entire thing without looking at me, sipping from her cup of tea. When it was over she didn't turn from the screen, just stared at the nothing there. After a while I stood up and collected my things. I was putting the film in my bag

when I saw her standing beside me. She said, What made you film me like that? I don't know, I said. What made you come here to show me that? I wanted you to see it. And? I don't know, I said. Her face was inches from mine. I could see the wrinkles the edge of her eyes, the wear. Her face had started to sag. She was two decades older than me and she lived hard, furiously. It showed but it made me want her more, not less. I wanted her age, her wisdom, the lifeforce that pushed and pulsed inside her. There was a sadness to her eyes, a loneliness, but, more than that, she was determined, singleminded, indefatigable. Before I really knew what I was doing, I kissed her and she was already naked with my dick in her hand, but not rubbing it, just holding it, claiming it, maybe.'

I felt the surging of his penis, not just from my touch, but the remembrance of his past, his idealised version of sex with Genevieve. 'Was that the only time?' I licked his tip, my tongue dancing on it.

His breath was short, his heartbeat fast, all concentration keeping him from coming. 'No, I moved in with her shortly after. We made many films together. Only a few exist anymore, I think.'

'She was your first great muse and collaborator.'

'She was the vision, the reason to all of my work.'

'And you loved her.'

'Yes.' Ready to burst, his voice thick but higher pitched.

'How long were you with her?' I kissed his thighs, his penis hard and wet, glimmering in the faint light.

'Ten years.'

'I wasn't even born yet.'

'No,' his voice cracking, my touch soft.

I took him in my mouth and swallowed him, all of him, to keep him with me always, to leave his scent inside of me so he could find me, his home.



After a while things changed. One of the librarians took too much interest. I was listening to the Gorecki CD all day, from when I got there to when I had to leave, and if I managed to stay the night I listened to it till I fell asleep.

'Hey, can I ask you a question?'

Looking up from my book, probably Rimbaud again, one of the librarians stood across the table from me.

'Sure.'

She sat. 'Aren't you in school?'

'I do PSEO.'

'You take all your classes at college?'

I shifted in my seat. Already I wanted to leave, to run. I wanted that CD, though, that Symphony No. 3. I needed it then. "Yeah.'

'Mhm.' She leaned back. 'Would you like to eat dinner with me tonight, when you're done studying here?'

'That's okay. I probably need to get home.'

She smiled. 'It's okay.' Her hand reached across the table, so I put mine on my lap. 'I want to help.' Her smile squinted her eyes but she looked pretty that way, her hair falling out of place, a few strands hanging into her face. Really pretty. I remember that. 'My name's Sharon.'

'Hi.' Rain was blowing against the window. Short pelts, barely audible through the thick glass, but why such thick glass? Who was trying to break in? Her eyes were kind. 'My name's Karen.'

'Karen, Sharon, how about that?' A slight laugh that I gave back to her. It hurt me, watching her, lying to her. And it was like I watched it, both of us, from far away. I felt so lonely watching her reach out to this poor dirty teenage girl. I could smell me from far away, the vomit and pissreek of homelessness and casual whoring. I hollowed out in front of her and I started to cry though I didn't want to, tried hard not to. She was the same one who hugged me that other day when I cried. She smelt the same, that rosy perfume smell. Clean, soap, she was a normal lady living a

life so far removed from how I was surviving those weeks, desperation in every lung and mouthful. She cooed to me rocking back and forth, watching this, I wanted to cry, but I remembered I was crying, and then I felt sick but there was nothing inside me, just a lifetime of nightmares that I wanted to awake from.

I guess I stopped crying and she stopped holding me after a while and let me alone. She told me to wait for her at closing time and she'd get me something to eat.

I sat there for an hour or two watching the rain, not reading my book, then I grabbed Symphony No. 3 and listened to it twice staring out the window. Lonely, even the rain. I thought about her, the singer to these songs of sorrow. Not the actual singer, but the figurative singer. I tried to figure out what it was that she lost and what made her so alone but all I could think of were the things that made me desperate and alone way over here where I hid from ghosts. I saw them sometimes in the library but I didn't talk to them. They were all lost there, the ocean, their birthcanal too close for them to understand that they had left life behind. She was a ghost. Even still, it's how that makes most sense to me. A journey through life, past death, and back to life again. It's a cycle, perfect. The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end. It was almost five by then. I put the CD player in my pocket, rolled up

the headphones and put them there, too. My jacket had big deep pockets so I could get by without a bag. It wasn't my jacket, not until I found it at some bustop. It smelt like stale smoke and cologne and rain.

No one was at the front desk, everyone busy making sure the library was back in order. I walked out and didn't slow down when the alarm started ringing but I didn't run because running is the best way to get caught. I put up my hood, zipped up my jacket, and walked to the bus station. When I got there, I begged until I had enough money to take a bus out of town. North this time. North because I didn't care and it left sooner, but not till the following morning, so I slept and hid, ran and hid, slept until the bus left. I turned sixteen on the bus asleep next to a fat lady who smelt of pickles. Pickles, for god's sake.



He's still not here. He can't find me. I've waited for months, years now. I'll be twenty one soon but none of it matters without him. I know he can't come back, not the way the singer came back, but even his ghost is enough. Just to see him, even the him that he is now. I'll know him by the smell. Sometimes I think he's here in bed

beside me and then I feel the warm body there and I scream until he or she leaves. I've made a habit of forgetting the present because maybe it will bring back the past and the only part of the past still inside me is him. Obliterate the now and there's only the then and the soon to be.

When I found him finally, I thought I'd never be alone again. It never occurred to me that he'd die, even after the first time. The problem is that love doesn't die. Life would be bearable then, if the dead took everything with them, and I guess they do. But we're left behind to hold the tattered remains.

I keep writing but nothing changes. Even the weather, perpetually perfect here. It mocks me. The sun keeps shining, the wind keeps blowing, the waves keep crashing. We did so much more, so much better when we were together.

Do you remember?

It's the only thing I live for, the memories that I'm afraid to remember too often in case they fall apart the way toys and clothes do. I can't let go of him but my hands grasp at air, at only the faint shadows I think are his face.



For a while I thought it was the places I went that were haunted, that I was unlucky. Years go by and I realize that the places are fine. The alleys I slept in, the houses, the motel rooms, the libraries, the buses, they weren't haunted. Full of ghosts, maybe, but not haunted.

It's me that's haunted.

Haunted by everything and everyone except the one I want.



A new town, a new library. The CD player's batteries died so I ditched it but kept the CD. For a while, I fell into the same routine. Rimbaud, Gorecki, hiding, sleeping, disappearing within myself, talking to ghosts, or not talking to them but watching. Routines can only last so long, especially when you're sixteen. Nothing lasts when you're sixteen. Even habits don't stick. The new library had a viewing room where movies could be watched. Comfortable chairs, loads of movies, and dim lights. Sleep is what that means.

I rifled through the movies, lots of Disney and classics, and then random others. One that he taught me about. At

the time, though, I didn't watch it. He showed it to me. I passed the days watching or sleeping through movies.

There were a series of short films by a man named Sebastian Falke. Everything changed the day I finally set down to watch one.

A black and white image of a child holding a skull on the cover below bold script that read *Songs for the Dead*. Her head was bowed down to the skull in her hand and her eyes closed, black hair falling over her face. My interest piqued, I put it in.

The film begins without a title screen or credits and the image looks rusty or dirty, old, as if the print was washed with dust. Black and white, the screen opens to a great white emptiness but I felt the camera moving. No points of orientation but the dust and dirt of the film racing by and the camera swept left then right then back and finally it went down, so far down that I thought it had to be going back up again and then it landed on the face of a woman with pale porcelain skin. The camera retreated and her whole head came into view, the black hair spread in all directions from her head. The woman was not the girl on the cover but the resemblance made me think it could be forty years in the future. Her eyes opened and, at the same time, a piano key hit and began to drone a repetitive melody made with the use of only five keys that repeated

over and over. The camera fell back until all of her was in view. She wore a plain black dress without sleeves and no shoes. The contrast of her skin and her dress, complete opposites married within her. A slow chiming bell joined the piano but in opposite direction. Where the melody of the piano rose, the bell dropped. She opened her mouth and plants sprouted and grew at an alarming rate until they covered her face and spread over her skin like a disease. The pace of my heart panicked, racing, but the music remained calm, quiet. Covered by flowers and new plantlife, the camera fell from an overhead shot to a point of view at the place where the woman's feet used to be. All in a single uninterrupted shot, she disappeared and then a tree thrust from the earth through the center of what her body once was. The tree grew and grew and the camera dropped back to keep it in frame, a longshot with the entire upper third of the screen taken by the canopy of the tree.

Pan back up into a sky full of clouds that trudged past like warships. Then it came down to a child standing next to a tree, the girl from the cover. She was small, maybe ten, maybe not even, her hair black and skin pale as the body that became a tree. The film was black and white but I thought her dress was blue because it appeared as a pale grey, the way the ocean looks on a cloudy day. Black and white, but her eyes were bright, a different shade of grey

from all the other colors, a dark light. The girl knelt next to the tree and reached her hands into the dirt and pulled out a human skull. The press of the keys intensified, the notes drawn longer, a fuller sound reached, but the bells remained the same contrast. The girl stood and walked towards the camera cradling the skull the way one cradles a small child. Her face, calm, relaxed, her eyes watching the skull in her arms. She reached the camera and the image flipped to watch her walk away from the tree. Cut to the girl standing at the edge of a body of water, her eyes cast to the horizon, the wind blowing her short hair. The piano dropped then and only the chime of bells remained until the girl began singing. Her voice, soft, a child's, but the words, I couldn't understand. It didn't matter, though, I knew what she meant. Rocking the skull back and forth in her arms, the bells dimming until there was only her voice, her incomprehensible lyrics not meant to be understood linguistically, but emotively. It was not what she sang, but how she sang, the music of the song, not the lyrics. Slowly, gradually, her song stopped and she bent over and placed the skull into the water. While she did this, the camera panned round and faced her so I watched her face, her hands, as she placed the skull in the water instead of the horizon and the rippling water. The shot remained there on the skull, its bones chipped, cracked, and worn, and I

saw her small feet stepping away from the shore to disappear.

The camera followed the girl for the next twenty minutes. The piano returned, the bells returned. She stood deep in the woods and found a dying deer. Taking its limp head in her hands, she pressed her forehead to its forehead and remained there, the camera steady, medium shot, the piano rising until she pulled back, the camera diving forward and taking her point of view, staring directly into the eyes of the now dead deer, watching its life fade from it, the piano now joined by soft drumming, all barely there cymbal brushed with a soft bass every other melody cycle of the piano. The camera retreated to a longshot at grasslevel watching the girl holding the deer, her body pressed against its no longer breathing torso. Faded out and faded back to her footsteps, the shot panning along with her but remaining below kneeheight. The crunch of leaves mixed with the odd percussion, the melodious piano and bells, a natural percussion of rhythmic feet and thick layer of leaves. The camera jumped up to the sky and the sound of crunched leaves grew louder and louder till the piano and bells were washed out. The sky was different than before, thick layers of clouds and the odd falling of rain. The black and white of the film caused the clouds to glow with a peculiar aura that reminded me of Gorecki's

singer on that mountain and the piano returned, droning, melancholic, the bells now sounding like tears, and then the percussion of steps and brushed cymbals combined with the softness of falling rain. An odd melody, a mix of repetitive minimalism and naturalism.

It was so lonely. The film continued in this way. She watched life die, caressed the creature in its final moments, then, sometime later, collected the skull and brought it to the shore, where she sang to it, for it, through it, until it was ready for the water. The film lasted maybe half an hour but it felt like hours and also no time at all.

I sat staring at the blank screen after it ended unsure of what I had seen, what it meant. My mind was a mess, confused, overstimulated, oversaturated. Never before had I seen such an idiosyncratic film. No dialogue, not even a single word spoken in the entire half hour, just this odd manual task, this herding of the dead, small melodies given to each skull laid to rest. I didn't understand so I put it back in its case, then put in something else, something with Dick van Dyke, maybe.

None of it stuck, the next thing I put on. Halfway through, I forgot I was watching anything. I sat watching the walls and the movement of the ghost in the room with me, the ghost of a man, I thought, the way his presence was larger than him, how his shadow was pale and flickered.

Sitting there, not lost in thought, but vacant of thought, as if viewing Falke's short film had worn me out, physically, mentally, maybe emotionally. I was dead to the world until the librarian entered and told me they were closing for the night.

The streets were alive at night but vagrancy was more common and they had places to stay that promised at least a bit of safety, warmth, and food. If I ever have to be homeless again, I'll head back.

I thought maybe the reason so many ghosts came from the west resulted from the amount of homeless who end there. The barely alive trading places with the newly dead. I don't know.

All that night, through the random mutterings, the screams of too many potentially undiagnosed mentally deranged adults, came the images of that little girl and all those skulls. A vivid and essential eye, every scene, no matter how strange, imbued with a powerful sense of beauty and aesthetic. The sweeping motions, the choreographed movements, the in-camera special effects and the illusion of constant continuity, every image arranged like a painting, displaying power, emotion, resonating through me. It wasn't just one scene or image that stuck with me, but all of it, every moment, and I realised then, too, that the song, the single melancholic movement of the piano that

touches every instant still rang in my ears and her song, those words that weren't words, still echoed in my head. The entire film replayed on my eyelids over and over, not a second missed, somehow perfectly imprinted into my mind as if it came from my very dreams.

I always wanted to see movies of my dreams but now the movie was my dream.

My pillow was wet with tears by morning, my chest and throat ravaged from the sobs. I ran back to the library when I finally could lie down no longer in the shelter and waited for the doors to open.

I watched *Songs for the Dead* again, bawling the entire time, not even sure why. This girl's whole life consisted of carrying life from the land of the living to the land of the dead, from their bodies to the ocean, for it was surely the ocean. So lonely, I felt myself crumbling, unable to even watch, just drenching the arm of the chair with all the loneliness I carried. And the music, the lonesome keys and their opposing chimes with so much space, so much silence in between. The sound of the film was about space, silence. It could have been made one hundred years before, back when films didn't have sound. He chose, Sebastian Falke, to let this silence out, to echo into the emptiness inside of us. He created an abyss for me to stare into that stared back into me and tore apart what I held inside,

breaking down the dams of my memories, my emotions, until I became just the shell, the life of me pouring out in torrents the way that poor miserable girl spent her life shepherding the about to die and ushering them into a new existence, a lifeless existence, with just a song. That song, so full of emotion, subdued and subtle, at first it was only the halfnotes of a child singing, but by the end it becomes so elegant in its simplicity, so perfect in its harmony. A harmony created by contrast that was established by that first scene, of death and creation.

Death as an act of creation.

It was at the heart of every scene. The film, I memorised it in my attempts to sleep the night before. I could recreate the position of every leaf from memory then.

The tears turned from despair and hollowness to elation by the end of my second actual viewing, though I spent most of it not watching but trying to piece myself together under the penetrating gaze of the film. It pointed the camera deep inside me and dug up all the memories I had killed and buried. There was no resolution to my feelings, not any crystallizing image that made everything all right, but, I don't know, maybe I cried all the evil out. The film purged me of all that I hid inside me so long, exorcized me of all the ghosts that haunted me. I don't know, really, but when I took the film and placed it back in its case,

nothing seemed so desperate anymore. The curtains had been drawn on my life and sunlight breathed into the dusty room of my heart.

The library had three of his films in their collection and I watched them all that day. They were all between twenty and fifty minutes. The second film I watched was the mural competition starring Genevieve and I recognised her as the first woman in *Songs for the Dead*, the one who becomes a tree. She starred in the other one, as well, *The Hand of God*, Genevieve played a one handed PI. A noir, silent, heavily implemented chiaroscuro. The story, given in a series of long takes mixed with frenetic cuts of images and actions, assaulted the viewer, forcing the story into me, the story of a man searching for his wife who disappeared some time in the past. The roles reversed, the femme fatale being a man, the PI a woman, and nothing turned out. The case, a deadend, the man who hired Genevieve killed, and no answers for her, just the trail of bodies. The film ended with a slow falling away of the camera, beginning on her face while she sat at her desk after hanging up the phone, her eyes downcast, confused, welled with tears, and the camera panned out further and further until it exited her office and the door swung closed. She looked up then and the backward pan stopped, my eyes and hers caught, then it faded to black. It was aggressive and painful, the

contrasts in rhythm, timing, and pacing. It lasted forty eight minutes and there was dialogue, but it couldn't be heard. Two people would talk but the shot would be far away or through a window so I only got the body language, the facial movements, not the words. The music, strings, lots of them, but mostly cello, deep and resonant, sweeping through the frenetic montages and breathing through the long takes.

All the films were aesthetically similar, the long takes, the sweeping camera, the minimal music, the absence of dialogue, the beautifully composed shots, the way the light played so perfectly into the shots, almost as if on accident, as if he pointed the camera at just the right time for the image to become perfect, unforgettable. Everything appeared too perfect to not be accidental.



Some days remind me of him more than others. The rain brings him back especially but I don't know why. I have no memory of us in the rain, of even staying in bed all day with the sound of rain filtering through the walls and ceiling. The rain brings untold mysteries with it. A promise of new life, that's what the smell is. How

everything smells a certain way in the rain, even flowers and people, that scent of rain permeates and lives in everything. And then the smell of impending rain, too, unmistakable. Rain itself is no great secret, how and why it happens, but the way it shrouds the world, makes it darker, closes everything in only to breed with the earth and give new life.

The boundary between worlds, that's what rain is. Ghosts fill the streets and cover the walls in the rain. It reminds them of something, probably, something they left behind. They feel rain, or so I've been told. It's their last grip on the real world, on this side of the boundary between living and not. They leave echoes behind then, little traces of themselves. That tenuous grasp they have on this world, they take advantage of it, consciously or not, and mark places the way a dog marks territory. And the only way for them to do that is to leave their sounds behind, echoes, tiny memories of their life.

Maybe that's why some ghosts hate. They left too much behind and now they're just an empty collection of memories that recognizes us and hates us for what we have and what they lost. Even here now, while writing this, I feel them, the spines on my back raised, the hairs on my arms reaching out to touch the skin they should have but don't. The smell, like I said, though, is how I know them, mostly.

Funny how they don't leave smell behind the way animals do but instead leave sounds, audiomemories. Incidentally, dogs don't like me because of the ghosts. Most pets, really.

But the rain, I keep waiting for him to come back on one of these storm clouds that passes over the ocean. If the rain really is the boundary then this is when it should be easiest for him. I think that's why I miss him so much in the rain, because I know he can find me.

The ocean of the past, I still hide from so much of it and rely on all that I don't run from. Everything before him, I waited for the nightmare to end, and it did when he accepted me into his arms. It was a new birth, a new life, but it flashed too briefly and left me with only these rabid bits of time that eat me, these memories that haunt me, but he, the ghost I need, remains lost.

Some days I pray for rain, for thunder and lightning. Standing on the rooftop with an iron cross around my neck begging for lightning to strike me because maybe he'll come with it or maybe it'll take me, throw me in the ocean with the other lost ghosts, and reunite us, my Sebastian and me.



Not everything was perfect between us. I loved him fully but he loved me hesitantly. Part of him was ashamed, in despair over it, afraid that he'd be punished for me.

'I can't face you today,' his back turned, feet hanging off the bed, head in his hands. 'If I take you, there'll be no relief.'

I put my hand on his shoulder, 'We'll escape.'

He shrugged me off, 'I'm ruining you. I'm an awful man for what I'm doing to you.'

'I need you.'

He turned to me, bags heavy under his redehyes, 'You don't. You really don't. If you leave me you'll find your proper life, relief, escape. There's a world out there for you and you're wasting away with me in this coffin of a house. It's too much for me to bear, to know what I'm doing to you.'

'I found you.'

'And I should've ran. I should have never touched you the way I did.'

'I touched you,' my hand crawled across space and touched his on the bed.

He took my hand, linked fingers, and stared. 'There will be no end to this if I don't make you go. You'll rot your life away before it's begun. I'm to blame.' He raised his

head and looked me in the eyes. So sad and alone. I could tell how it hurt him so to say it because he had nothing left. There was only me and before me he was festering here, waiting to die. 'You gave me new life. You brought me back. Running through meadows, that's how this has all been for me. Birds singing and sunshine. I'm old enough to be your grandfather.'

'I don't care,' crawled on my knees to him, taking his head in my arms, 'I don't care. We'll run forever, through fields and mountains, just keep running.' Face to face, his head in my hands, his face was a mountain crumbling, a sunset bleeding, a heartache putrefying. 'I need you and you need me.'

His hands took me, those soft delicate hands, right below the armpits and laid me down on the bed and he walked out the room, slowly, me calling his name after him.

We sat on opposite sides of the door he locked for hours.

'You're only sixteen,' his voice heavy, weighed by regret. It hurt me, the way he suffered, how I knew he wanted me still, but couldn't accept it, couldn't live with me.

'I love you,' my voice may have died at the door, so weak was it mumbled into my knees, swimming through my tears. 'I love you.'

For a long time we said nothing but we knew the other sat there inches away, waiting. Waiting for what? So much of my life spent waiting for an indescribable moment off in the future. Waiting to wake from the nightmare of life, waiting for the ghost of the man I love, waiting for him to open the door and take me in his arms.



After that we spent hours in bed exploring one another with new vigor but nothing was resolved.

'You need to promise me something,' the light was dim and he stroked my head, ran his fingers up and down my back.

My head was on his chest, eye closed, playing with his stomach hair.

'You need to promise me that you won't stay too long.'

The tears welled in my eyes again though I thought I had none left. 'Don't leave me.'

'You need to begin your life.'

'You are my life.'

His chest inflated and deflated, a huge breath. 'I've spent many years waiting for you. I've waited for you since before you were born. You lived in my dreams that I was caught

in, afraid to let go of. I gave you the moon then, gave you everything for saving me, bringing me back to life. You're my Orpheus that travelled through a lifetime of hell just to save a pitiful old man. But I can't have you, can't keep you. You belong to the world and I to death.'

He felt my tears on his stomach, I know he did from the way he gripped my shoulder. 'All my life has been a nightmare till now.' My sobs that I tried to hide shattered my voice. 'Because of you I'm still alive, still able to go on living.' I turned to him, whispered, hoping the words wouldn't flounder before they reached him, 'Don't you love me?'

His hand on my cheek, I closed my eyes and leant into it, the softness of skin, the smell of sweat, my orgasm still on the hand that held me, and that moldmusk surrounding us. 'My dear, one day you'll meet a man, a man your own age. He'll give you everything that I never could. If I saved your life, he will make your survival worthwhile. He'll expel the ghosts that haunt you the way I can't. I'm too old to give you anything but what little is left of my heart. It's not enough and you deserve so much more.'

'So alone without you,' my chest heaved, gasped, my throat raw, the snot dribbling from my nose and mouth but he didn't care. 'All my life, a cage without a window, but you you you you,' I broke off, unable to continue.

He wiped my mouth, my nose with his hand, pulled me close to him and kissed my eyes, wiped away the tears and whispered, the tears heavy in his voice, 'Please, go on living.'



So many times in my life spent drowning. The rain crashed through the broken sundown, blinding, the walls crumbled, and I yearned, my heart bursting, the past bleeding from me, flesh on flesh like flowers drifting downstream. I was in a dream, all my life, a nightmare I couldn't wake from, flooding my lungs and veins, then electric bright fireworks flashed and the nightmare turned to ecstatic visions, the sky from grey to blue because of a first kiss, the days with silent heartache but fiery unfettered love, the memories I mourn now like Gorecki's singer swept up in her sorrow and loneliness, and the thought came, the beauty of a new dawn, so I promised to keep it sacred, and I pray my way through the rain, the flood, the drowning gasped breaths waiting for those happy days promised me in my youth, the sunrise without remorse.



How long until I see you, till the sun comes shining through? Back when we were so new, so young and old, and you promised, and I promised, I'll never forget you.



I spent the days at the library listening to Gorecki but mostly rewatching Sebastian's films. Even when they ended I watched them. Anytime my eyes closed I saw Genevieve painting or running through claustrophobic hallways searching for a woman who may not have ever existed. Searching for herself. I watched them so many times that I began to understand them. In *The Hand of God* she wasn't searching for the man's wife but for herself. All the running around, the hallways and staircases that went in all directions, montaged to a dizzying effect always led back to her, a slow pan and long take of her doing a simple action. Making food, folding laundry, cleaning her gun, these were at the center of the film. The noir, the detective mystery was a means of discovering the innerlife,

the woman behind the door, the woman through that final pane of glass. I even began to know or at least imagined that I knew what she said in her silent dialogues with other characters.

'All things come and go but we know we won't break.'

'The Devil's got a grip on me.'

She ran from and after the mystery, the *homme fatale*, only to watch him die and she was left alone, the way she began. She knows she won't break though the Devil has her, despite what comes and goes.

Obsessed. The only way to describe me in those days, the only way to define my identity was through those films. The film of Genevieve painting was about life, *Songs for the Dead* was about death, and *The Hand of God* was about everything in between, about identity and memory, but they were all about isolation. And it was about me, it seemed. I felt whole while watching them, no longer alone, despite the subject matter.

The nice things about libraries is that they have computers. Anything can be discovered on the internet, a quick Google search and millions of bits of information appear. When the films became too much for me, too much for me to not know more, to not understand everything about Sebastian Falke, I turned to the internet.

He made ten short films, many of which only existed in databases. Five of them were lost completely. The other ones existed but there was no information about where or who had them. He had a single feature length film, which, like all of his shorts, were commercial and critical failures. His feature was called *Who Do You Run To?* and told the story of a man stuck in a hole. At eighty seven minutes it was his longest work and was also his last completed work. In a way I knew it was the one that mattered most to him, the one that carried the imprint of his soul. But the reviews were devastating. 'Trite,' 'idiotic,' 'incomprehensible,' 'the longest hour and a half of my life.' Not a single positive reaction to the film and it, too, was said to be lost. Sometimes movies are so bad that they're good but even this was deemed too worthless for that. The film was released twenty years before I did my search when Sebastian was thirty seven.

Interviews were available online but only a few. He grew up in Ohio in a small town to normal parents. An average childhood by his own account. His family moved to California when he was fourteen and he finished high school there. His first film was the one with Genevieve. He made it when he was eighteen. It got him a lot of attention, both positive and negative, in the art community. Some said it wasn't a film, some applauded his brave use of angle

and movement, his finely tuned eye. He had an affair with Genevieve that lasted ten years until her death at the age of forty eight. In those ten years he completed all but one of his shorts, *Songs for the Dead*. They had a torrid love affair which often got them more attention than their work. They fought often and publicly. Numerous affairs, shattered lovers, all that. They were a pair of rebellious artists living on the fringe of the fringe, avant gardists without a center. His films continued to be equally mocked and praised. Mocked for their incomprehensibility, their ignorance of dialogue and language to convey story. Praised for their boldness, the cinematography, their vivid aesthetic, and Genevieve's acting. Outside of the fringe artists, though, there was no attention and the films disappeared as if they never existed, showing up at a film festival here or there for a single showing. There had been no showing since before I was born, though.

After Genevieve died, Sebastian didn't make a film for ten years. It's a lost part of his life but he popped up occasionally across the country to start a fight, show one of his old films, or ruin a marriage. He grew fat in those days and appeared dishevelled and confused. His life had fallen apart without her. And then, one day, five years after his last appearance on the radar, he debuted a new film, *Songs for the Dead*. It had Genevieve's last appearance on film

and, knowing this context, allowed me to understand the death, the rebirth better. He was booed out of the theatre and the critics hated him unanimously. Backhanded compliments explained his strong aesthetic but bemoaned his continued inability to write and direct. And then, shortly after, his first and only feature appeared at Cannes, again to boos and cries of outrage.

The reviews never hinted at the story because they insisted that there was none, that it was a series of images, of long drawn out takes of a man living in a hole.

He was alone. I knew it then. The isolation I had seen in his films had only grown, increased. After the failed film, he vanished completely and many thought he died. A few reports said he lived in northern California in squalor. For twenty years he had been alone. For ten years before that he had lived in a hole. For ten years before that he lived in a nightmare affair that destroyed him and buried him alive with nothing but his memories of a life that the world saw as worthless.

The privacy for people that no one cares about is much lower than a celebrity's. It didn't take long to find Sebastian's phone number and then his address. I could be at his house in two hours.



That night I begged until I had money for a bus, did a lot of running, a lot of hiding, after a while it became habit, those weeks on the streets. Dodging rapists and cops, begging, stealing, sleeping in unlocked cars, under locked ones, bridges, find a woman, like I said, safer that way. If you're lucky you can get money quick. This wasn't one of those times but I got there. I slept at the shelter or tried to, too excited to sleep, the reels of film playing over and over, filling me. For the first time in my life I didn't feel alone, clutching those films in my head, savoring every frame. In the morning I showered with soap and stole some clothes. They didn't fit, baggy jeans and a too tight top, but I thought it was kind of sexy. I got one of the volunteers to cut my hair off my neck. She did an all right job.

I got to the station early, bought my ticket, begged for a sandwich, didn't get one, but someone left most of a muffin on a table. The guy was pissed when he got back to no muffin and no coffee but I didn't care. The bus was mostly empty so I curled up on my seat but still couldn't sleep. Just kept shaking and smiling holding onto my knees to make sure I stayed together, whole.



First I found him at a local coffeeshop but I said that already. Just sitting there looking like he stepped out of his grave to drink coffee. Delicate, his movements, his face, his demeanor. At any moment he stood on this precipice, this cliff or edge or boundary, and if he crossed it he'd collapse, disintegrate into dust to be carried off by the wind into the ocean with the rest of the deadsouls. That first day I mostly watched him, followed him. He walked and walked but never went anywhere. His only stop the entire day was the coffeeshop but he walked for about two hours his head in the air, mind miles away, his gait slow but deliberate. His house mirrored him, barely together, on a tightrope ready to dismantle, its atoms and molecules dissipate and leave nothing left but a heap of dust.

My heart beat so loud I couldn't think and my throat was dry, clicking every time I swallowed. My body on fire, every single atom burning alive, ready to burst, I waited as long as I could without dying and knocked on his door, a hollow thud.

Nothing. I waited forever but no response so I knocked again and waited and knocked and waited but he never

came. I wandered around his house. It was small, single story, and only four rooms, a perfect little square. The curtains drawn, no light went in, no sight went out.

Buried alive, living in a hole. The long grass infested by weeds broke the pavement of his walkway. He lived like a ghost already. Lost in the world of the living, hiding in shadows, dropping echoes as films, the dirty coffeecup. I sat on his stoop and waited, picking grass and throwing it in the air, covering ants with it and shoving blades down antholes.

The sun began to set and I had nowhere to go, no orientation, even. Following him got me lost, so lost I didn't remember even how I got there, so I kept knocking and then kicking and then yelling for him, screaming his name over and over, no longer caring that I had come there only to meet him, the desperation grabbed me by the stomach and pulled down through the earth threatening to bury me there outside his door.

'Who the fuck are you?' His voice growled, rasped, and slurred. Standing there, drunk, peering at me with one eye.

So taken by surprise I just stared at him, my mouth agape, my body frozen, but sweat all of a sudden covered me and my shirt stuck to me. I swallowed hard, 'Sebastian Falke?'

'What the fuck do you want?' He steadied himself on the door, his legs too used to the slur of the drunken world to stand with the sober.

Nothing was going right. The plan, I don't know. He took me in his arms, kissed me, told me that he'd take care of me and love me. I was sixteen then, it seemed possible. Instead of a man I met a growling beast, a monster returned from the dead, woken from his infinite slumber. I knew he was in there, though. The man who made those films. He had to be.

I told him I wanted to talk about his films and he slammed the door.

He left me out there until it was dark, the breeze cold. I didn't scream or pound on his door, I just sat on his stoop crying until I thought the skin of my hands would prune. They didn't.

He opened the door without a word and when I turned he wasn't there. I waited for a few minutes but he didn't come back to the door so I went in. The house was a mess. Garbage and food and bottles everywhere. Everything stank of stale air and mold. Books rotted on shelves. The television was on but he wasn't watching it. I tiptoed through the house. I may have been on the streets for a few months at this time, only showering once, wearing the same clothes every day, but even I thought this place was

filthy. I crept around but he wasn't there. At the far end was a small kitchen and across from that was a bathroom with a tub and sink and toilet. The only room left was behind the closed door attached to the main room beside the bathroom.

I sat on the couch watching television but he never came out. I heard him, though. Muttering, pacing, screaming in quick bursts that disappeared as if they hadn't existed.

Teeming with them. Ghosts. They lived here with him but he never knew. When he was drunk like he was that first day, though, a part of him felt it and that's who he talked to. He couldn't understand them but they came to him. I don't know why. I never talked to his ghosts. That's not the kind of things lovers do. Everyone's allowed some privacy.

On the couch I clung to my knees rocking back and forth without looking at the television. I stared at his wall until it went silent. I had come all this way, running from so much, and, now that I was there, what was I to do?

I cleaned. I filled bag after bag with the trash, the food, the bottles. All night, my first night with him, I cleaned and never even saw him. His bathroom had maybe never been cleaned but he had some bleach and a scrub. The kitchen was much the same. No vacuum cleaner but I didn't want to wake him and nothing was going to clean

that carpet anyway. I opened the curtains which were really just sheets strung up over the windows and the first light of day poked through. Exhausted, I lied on the couch and watched the sun crawl across the floor.



I was woken by a prodding at my shoulder and a grumble, 'Who are you?' repeated until I woke up to see him poking me with his index finger

I sat up, brushed the hair out of my face, 'Alina.'

He leaned back and scratched himself, his eyes squinted as if not used to sunlight, though it was certainly already afternoon. 'What're you doing here?'

'You made some films a long time ago. I've been watching them, the ones I could find, and,' I watched his feet because I couldn't stand his small eyes, my hands clenched and damp on my knees, 'I wanted to meet you.'

I waited for his response, for him to throw me out or laugh in my face but he just stood there, his feet not moving. Raising my gaze, his face was in his hand, the other crossed his body holding himself.

'I watched your films, *The Hand of God*, *Songs for the Dead*, and one that didn't have a name about a woman

painting. Watching them,' I stopped, caught my breath, 'all my life I've been waiting or running or trying to find the answer to some question no one ever asked me and then it all fit, everything came together, when I watched these. They're all I can think about and I've been watching them over and over and over for days. I, I had to meet you,' my voice trailing to a faint shiver.

He walked back into his room and I brought my knees up to rest my chin on, nothing going properly. After a few minutes he came back with a DVD and put it in and turned on the television. It was *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

No words passed between us and I was careful not to touch him, to try to not exist. I recognised the name of the film from the library but I had never watched it.

It shocked me, hurt me. She was so beautiful, so sorrowful, and those eyes, the intensity blazing from them at every movement. Every tear reached out to me and I found my own tears to match. The quiver of her lip, the wide-eyed insanity. And then, her eyes faded, death was taking her one frame at a time, the same way death had been dogging me for so long that I could smell them everywhere, the ghosts, especially there. She faded and I crumbled with her. So invested was I that I forgot Sebastian beside me, forgot that I had travelled all this way to meet a man who didn't care who I was or what I wanted, forgot that I

was just a girl, barely sixteen, on her own, alone, holding onto her knees to keep her very body together, to keep herself contained lest she fall apart and join the haunters. My heart failing, my vision blurred, I felt a hand on my neck, between my shoulders, I hadn't realized the way I sobbed, and then she awoke and so she was burnt for sins she didn't have, for her unwavering faith. Unfair, unjust, how life killed her before she had a chance to die, before she found what she looked for, the answer still beyond her, but, maybe, in death, burning.

My head fell to his lap and he stroked my hair and later I apologized for making his jeans wet but I didn't even care then who he was. There was too much in too short of a time, Gorecki, Falke, Dreyer. Each one splintering me apart but only Sebastian put me back together and his hands tried then, stroking my head and then holding me in his arms and then taking me to his room and lied beside me, sweetly, not trying to fuck me but just trying to keep me steady, keep me breathing, keep me together like I had been trying for so long and only just succeeding.



I didn't plan it like that but life can be perfect in ways. Accidents are better than the best laid plans. I think that's a saying, maybe, probably. It's something about timing. How it's no good to meet the right person at the wrong time or the wrong person at the right time. People discount how important timing and chance are. But, me, they're all I've ever been able to rely on and they're all that give me hope, that allowed me to survive. I look at my past, at all the lucky breaks, how certain things happened at just the right time or in such a way that they led me to a perfect conclusion. My whole life, really, led to him, Sebastian. Leaving home, running from so many things but heading west because of the ghosts, finding the library, Gorecki teaching me things I never knew but somehow always felt, that librarian caring too much, the films at the next library, and then, there I was, in bed with the man I had accidentally or unconsciously been running to my entire life.

It wasn't him that started it. He never even said a word to me, just held me, his hand on my stomach, my ass against his hips. I rolled and kissed him, kissed his neck, unzipped his pants, felt the heat before it was even in my hands, and I knew it was too big, he was too much but I knew he had to be, had to be too much for me or what was the point. So I dove in, took him, squirmed out of my pants, guided

his hands to my breasts, to my vagina, let him feel how wet I was, taste it on his fingers, but I slowed him, made him take his time, my cries of anguish kept stopping him till I screamed to go. So deep, so far that I thought he'd come out the otherside, there couldn't be more and then there was and I dug into his back, tears in my eyes, but I wanted it, needed it, needed to be full of something, of not just the images and stories he created so long ago, but to be full of something tangible, that I could grab onto, hold onto with more than just my memories, so I took all of him, as much of him as there was, though I thought it would kill me, my vision blacking at the edges, my heart racing, my breath shuttering, and I came and came and came and there was always more.



For days he didn't speak to me and barely acknowledged me. We ate together and I cleaned up after him but I was just another ghost that followed him. We didn't have sex again, either. He drank until he couldn't stand anymore and I took him to bed, held him till the morning, then repeated the process, watching him, cooking for

him, cleaning, and making sure he survived his bouts with alcohol, his raves at the ghosts.

For a week, we lived like this.

'Why did you come here?'

His voice surprised me, so long since I heard it. He lied in bed still, awake early.

'I needed to meet you.'

'How did you see them?'

He was shrouded by the darkness of his room. A lump on the bed, rivers of light spotlighted bits of the room, the dust thick in the air.

'At a library. They had them in their film collection.'

No sound, no words, no movement, then, 'You shouldn't be here.'

'I have to be.'

'I died. A long time ago.'

'Me too.'

He sighed. His voice groggy but stepping further from sleep, reaching that high tone I grew accustomed to over the months. 'I can't save you.'

I walked to his doorway and stood there watching him. He made no movement, not even to look at me until I was in bed beside him, under the blanket for the first time in a week. 'You already have.'

'Why are you doing this?'

'Don't you ever feel alone?'

His eyes bloodshot and lips cracking, 'Forever.'

'You don't have to be anymore.'

He rolled away from me. I put a hand to his back and slid it to his shoulder then slid in behind him, took him in my arms the way he held me that night. His breath was shallow and I could feel tears in his chest but he made no sound. Crying silently, the same way he laughed, his body was so still but for the cracked sobs, the reverberations of his lungs, the clicking of his throat.

'I don't want to be alone,' whispered into his ear, my face against his burning neck. 'I don't want to be alone anymore,' I felt them in me, the tears that never stopped, that I had held back for so long but now came at all hours of this lonely quixotic journey I took to find him, my Sebastian. I dropped tears onto his neck and he reached a hand behind him and put his palm on my cheek. Every inch of skin was on fire, my own and his. Our tears came as one, our sobs united, our bodies perfect, bound to one another, the timing synced.



We were together for two years. Two years, the only years of my life that mattered to me. He loved *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and we watched it often. I cried every time but never let him turn it off. He didn't have any of his other films. He didn't have anything, really. Just his small house away from everything. He never worked and I never asked where his money came from. I didn't have to because there was always enough for anything we needed, though, admittedly, we used very little. He screamed when I told him my age, told me to leave, but I couldn't, wouldn't, so I stayed. He loved me often and I loved him fully. We fought the way couples do on television or in movies but usually about me being too young. It bothered him always but never me. He never seemed so old to me, the way his youth would kick up out of nowhere. Especially after he quit drinking. We walked on the beach, went to restaurants, a normal life. A healthy sex life. His enthusiasm and vitality surprised us both. 'I've been dead so long that I've become a young man again.' In many way he had.



I spend a lot of time on the beach these days. It's always summer here but autumn's coming. It's hard to tell

if you're not used to it, but it's mostly in the coloring of the sky and the shape of the clouds. I can't leave the ocean and I sit out here for hours now staring off into where I think the waves begin. One day he'll ride them back to me. The ocean is a boundary like the rain. But, more than that, it's a promise. A promise of change, a promise of the past. All life after death begins here in these unfathomable waters of the Pacific. Every crash of the waves brings a new ghost and a new star. The stars, they're everywhere here. So many more than anywhere else I've been. Galaxies become visible, long streaks of clustered stars, like a family tree that began millions and billions of years ago with the very first death. The death of the past universe, the center of this one. From there, the branches stretch in all directions and they're reflected in the water below, this ocean bigger than all others.

I feel closer to him since starting this. I can almost smell him now. It's been so long, so lonesome without him. When he died most of me went with him but being near the ocean and writing about him brings bits of me back, the me that I was when we were together. He called me his autumn greeneyed girl, his midnight child. I never had a name like that for him, not that I told him. He's the love that doesn't end, the love that kills. He died for his love and maybe I'm to blame. I thought that for a long time, that the

sins of his, the sin of legal rape and illegal love eventually took him from this world.

I couldn't face his funeral. They didn't know me and I know they didn't want me there, not after his will. I don't know where the money came from but even after death he takes care of me. He remembers me and only death keeps us apart. I pray for him to find his way because I know he's lost like all the other ghosts I know, have known. I talk to them sometimes, the newcomers, the ones fresh from the ocean. They haven't seen him.

I've been afraid to write this and have been putting it off for too long. The end. It's fitting, how his death is the end of this story. But I'm going to begin now. I'm going to write that which sits most heavily in me, that which has dictated the last three years of my life. My hands are shaking and the tears are already here. I hadn't cried for almost two years now but writing this, the flood of the past, I can't keep up, and I've walked in a daze, treading on people's toes, mumbling apologies. I can't face my bed alone, the same bed he offered escape, where I found relief. But I feel better. Maybe even alive. I think, now, me talking, writing, I mean, the future's there. Maybe not for me, but for us. Finishing this, I think I can walk again. I think I can live again. Breathe and not choke on rotten flesh, open

my eyes and not have the tears streak my face, making me die prematurely.

When I finish I'm closing my eyes and counting to ten. He'll be here when I open them. I believe in him.



I came home, dropped the groceries, and ran to his body lying so still on the floor. I shook him till I screamed till I ripped at my hair till the ambulance arrived and took us both away.

His pancreas, ruined, tumored. The doctor told us a lot of things that day and I know I listened but I can't remember any of it other than squeezing his hand as hard as I could and looking at his glassed eyes in that sunken face.

I should've known. He grew weaker to the point he was often in pain but he never let on. His appetite died but only for food. He still loved me.

It was too late for surgery. The cancer. He should've been there months ago. Only eighteen and my boyfriend was terminal. Sebastian refused to stay at the hospital.

'If there's nothing you can do let me go home to die in peace.'

'We can make you comfortable.'

He was already pulling at the IV and other medical equipment, 'Fuck off,' and he did and we went home.

He wasted away and I watched. There was no improvement ever. He just got weaker and weaker and weaker.

He smiled at me and took my hand, put a palm to my cheek while I wiped the food he couldn't swallow from his lips. 'You're the best thing that ever happened to me.'

I turned my head, let the hair fall over my face to hide from him. I couldn't let him see me cry, see me disintegrating with him. He needed me to be alive so that he could die. I wanted to go with him, to have him take me with him.

'You don't have to stay here. It's okay. You've given me everything already.'

'Just because the boat sinks doesn't mean I'm letting go.' My voice surprised me, steady, almost lighthearted, motherly.

He laughed, silent, but his face grimaced and he coughed and I wiped the spittle from his face. 'All my life I've prayed for you and you saved me.'

'Funny thing for a dying man to say.'

He grew serious and took my hand with strength and pulled me close, my tears visible to him, his eyes yellow glass, 'I love you,' whispered but not on purpose.

My lips broke, tumbled and shattered, and my face fell to pieces. He held me like I was dying, soft and comforting, my sobs drowning everything, the last two years, my sixteen year nightmare before, his death, my future, all sunk with me but he held on following me deeper and deeper. I couldn't say it through the tears so I screamed it till my voice tore in half and I forgot that he was dying, only conscious that he was leaving and there was nothing to be done. 'I love you I love you I love,' until the curtain fell on that memory.

He was so cold then. So fragile. I lied with him for three months, bathing him, feeding him, changing him. He called me a saint and I pierced my heart, tied a knot from it to his. When he fell asleep I promised to follow him wherever he went, promised to find him no matter how far or long he wandered. I stared at his face memorizing every wrinkle canyoned on his face, the mountain ranges of his engraved emotions. If I could hold onto something, hold onto his face, his body, memorize it, make the memories permanent, etch them all the way to my veins, my arteries, the capillaries of my lungs, make him a part of each heartbeat, each breath I take. He slept like the dead then and I was terrified every time he closed his eyes.

He refused to let me call an ambulance, a doctor, even a nurse. 'I'll die in the hole I dug thirty years ago.'

'With me.'

'You need to start living.'

'Tell me you'll live.'

'I tried but it never worked.'

'Till me?'

'Till you.'

'Till you,' my whisper, my tears, it was all I had then. And when I cried too long, when I ran out of liquid, my body ached, every molecule tearing with an acid burn.

He stank of death. Even his breath. He rotted from the inside and could no longer eat.

I think he wanted to atone for something. When delirious, he spoke of his sins. Not just me. Never me then, actually. Came to terms with it or never really cared. He told me about the others, about the lives he ruined, the marriages he broke, the fights with his family, with other people. He talked about Genevieve and how he hated her and loved her, how she ruined him and so he tore her life apart. He had at least one son that he knew of that he refused to see and a handful of others he was never allowed to see. He never existed to so many people. It was a confession, a final search for absolution.

His body fell apart, his breath barely leaving his lips, his lungs crackled, 'You are the only thing in my life that matters. That has ever mattered.'

I stroked his face, tried to give him water, but he kept his mouth closed. It was all he could do then.

'One day I woke up and my life was ending, all my dreams given to celluloid, and only remembered by you.'

On the last day of his life he couldn't speak and he only opened his eyes once. His yellow glasseyes beckoned me so I crawled to his side, took his hands in mine. We stayed like that forever, for the rest of his life. For the rest of mine. His eyes closed and I remained there alone for many hours. The sun rose and set and I remained.

No tears left for me but I could not move. His face, ancient, dried, motionless. His breath no more, his heart no more, his body, inert. He died and left me alone.

I felt nothing. A hollowness burrowed deep inside me like a disease and rotted my heart, lungs, my life, my soul. When they took me away I was catatonic and in the hospital.

I left my soul with his body and flowers at his grave.



O^{ne}
Two
Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Part Two

I never loved him and still don't but neither have I been able to forget him. Sometimes I hated him, often pitied him, but, despite everything, he's still the one I think about and remember best all these years later. I never forget the ones who loved me, and he loved me most. That much I know.



I met him when he was sixteen, a lifetime ago, back out of town at the far edge of the woods with a gastank in one hand and matches in the other, cigarette in his teeth, that oversized black peacoat he always wore. I went on many walks back then to hide my own smoking from my parents. Wandering through the woods with headphones on sometimes singing quiet like to myself if I was really lost. A way to keep the trees friendly and wolves at bay.

Someone told me that one time or I dreamt it or made it up but there was some notion that a song would keep the wolves away. Might not have even been wolves in those woods but I sang anyway to keep myself together. It's dangerous to fall apart in the woods, especially in November like it was, all the fallen leaves and the orange and brown ones still clinging to branches. If I fell apart then, I would get trampled along with the brittle leaves covering the forest like a shag carpet.

I was lost then, I think, so I sang but my eyes never saw him till he heard me. When I walk my eyes fall to my feet. I don't try but it's always been the way I walk, slow and downcast. Often people misconceive it for melancholy but I never have thought of myself as depressive. A slow walker, yes, and one who needs to keep her eyes on the ground in case it surprises her, yes, that, too, but not sorrowful. That's one of those ways life miscommunicates, one of those ways that people get the wrong idea about one another. Sometimes I think that's what happened to us for all those years, you and I, we never rightly understood what the other meant or wanted. Slow and down mean forlorn but never did I think that and now it's so much a part of my gait that I see no need to change.

He heard me before he saw me and he saw me before I did him. He stood gaping at me with that big dumb smile

of his, real toothy, the cigarette bit down on, the smoke making his eye close, the gas, the matches. My headphones still on, I didn't hear me gasp but you said I near fell over. You, the exaggerator extraordinaire.

I dropped my cigarette, 'What are you doing out here?' My voice came breathless.

You laughed the way you did then, that stupid huh huh, 'Who're you?'

'Are you burning down the forest?'

You looked from hand to hand, back to me, spit out your cigarette, and kept smiling. 'No,' was all you said.

'Yes, you are.'

'Yes, I will, but not yet.' You laughed again.

Twilight descended and you said, 'Shouldn't you be heading home now?'

'Not till you promise not to burn the woods down.'

'What good's the promise of a stranger.' Not a question and you stepped toward me.

'What's your name?'

Your smile stopped, eyebrows knit, one halfraised because you never learnt how.

'If we know each other's name then we're no longer strangers. I'm Virginia.'

'Virginia,' a whisper just audible, you nodded, undid the cap and started pouring gas. I told you not to until

I screamed but you kept on pouring and laughing, staring over your shoulder at me like this was a game until I chased after you. You feigned threats of burning me, too, splashing the gas near me while I chased and screamed until I pushed you down, the gas all over my hands and your shirt and hair, that dumb laughter turned to the real kind, the kind that stuck with you into adulthood, high and womanly.

Looking around to make sure no one saw us, I grew anxious out in the woods, the dark spreading but for the moon at the horizon, a great orange circle, and the stars peering through the canopy. 'Get up right now and stop laughing.'

You stretched out your hand, still laughing, still on your back as if nothing funnier had ever occurred.

'Not till you stop laughing.' I pulled my coat tight and thought about leaving you but I knew you would set fire to this place.

'Okay, okay,' through laughter, you pushed yourself to a sitting position and stretched a hand out for me again. 'Help me up.'

I sighed loud for you to hear and took your hand and pulled but you went limp. Your laughter rose and I threw your hand back at you.

'Okay, okay, I'm sorry, won't do it again, just give me your hand.'

We tried again and you pulled me on top of you. My screams beat against the trees and rose up to the clouds but there was no one to hear and your grip was strong, your laughter infuriating but you promised to let me go if I calmed so I did. Our faces inches apart, I thought you were going to kiss me and sometimes I wonder if the rest of your life would have been different had you simply had the courage back then to do what I know you regretted not doing for so many years. Now, I could not say if I would have kissed him then but life's different when young. If a person wanted to kiss, a kiss tended to happen.

I remained on top of him, neither of us speaking, my young breasts against your chest, our sexes aligned, and all the dark bathing us. The grass was cool and your eyes were halfmoons shrouded by my own fallen hair, the bangs of mine connected with yours, the black melting into the muddy blonde you always were except in pictures of your childhood. So long we laid there that our bodies fell into sync but we never even touched, not properly, not skin against skin, and I wonder if that small detail, even more than the kiss, was what set the rest in motion. Lovers touch skin but we never made it there. The musk of a late fall and

the sting of gasoline in our nostrils. You asked me if I had a cigarette and I asked if you would let go.

We walked home chaining cigarettes but not talking, careful not to start ourselves on fire. At my door I told you to promise not to burn down the woods but all you said was your name, Marcel.

I thought about you that night staring out at the harvest moon and I know you stared, too, probably from your rooftop the way you always did. I didn't then, but I picture you now the way you must have been that night, your peacoat open, standing barefoot in the midnight chill watching that great big keeper of dreams turn into the morning light.



It wasn't so much that I didn't want him to start a fire that might alight the whole town but that those woods were my woods, or so I never stopped believing. My whole childhood till I left with him belonged to those trees. Besides, trees are good people and never do any harm, least not the kind that deserves that kind of death, asphyxiation, burning. I shudder to think of how many trees must die in that fashion. Far more preferable to be buzzsawed down

leaving just an idle stump. If I was a tree, that's how I would want to go. But those woods, from the very beginning I spent my days in there. Pap was outdoorsy and never had a son so he substituted me for those many things that a man feels must be passed from him to another. Never was I my mother's child, always jeans, never dresses and bows, always grease and fires, not flowers and poesy. There is something about the bond between a father and daughter that cannot be matched by any other. That is why, I suppose, people get those issues, daddy ones, when their pa is a deadbeat or an asshole. I was lucky.

But the trees were more than just the playground of my youth and a place to be alone in adolescence. I never have told anyone about this but those trees are alive. Not just alive as in they exist and turn carbon dioxide to oxygen and go through photosynthesis and the seasonal cycle, but in the way that I am alive, in the way that a person exists. Most people never listen because most people never bother to separate from the noise of human life, but, if like me, many things can be heard and understood. I climbed trees and stayed in them for days only returning homeward to eat and sleep and reassure them who lived there that I still lived.

'My little Artemis,' my pap called me owing to how Artemis of legend was a friend of the spirits that lived in

the trees. See, treespirits are notoriously cautious and shy but they befriended Artemis and shared with the goddess the many secrets of the forests of the world.

My pap never cut down a tree in all his life or so he said because to do so would bring misfortune on the fellow who felled the wood that housed a treespirit. He said that must be why they took to his daughter so. I owe many things to my father.

The woods were a safe haven for me then as well. The early years of public life was not easy on me. I was bullied and abused by the other girls because I didn't care about being pretty but I was small and thin, all bones then. All my friends turned on me when the pretty girls began to ridicule me and I spent my elementary and middle school years alone, friendless but for the trees and the spirits amongst them. In there I was a queen and I lived a life of magic and wonder. All those trees around, it was easy to forget, to erase the lonesomeness.

But, the real secret is not that the treespirits exist, but from where they came. If a person is inclined to believe in such, in spirits and demons and so on, said person tends to believe that these spirits are immortal, begot from some fantastical plane of existential consummation. In a sense, I suppose that isn't incorrect, but neither is it the truth. Treespirits, at least these that lived in the wood, they came

from the very city we inhabited. It took some of them centuries to find their way home and lived in that area far before the settlers who founded it arrived, while others navigated after death better and found a home where they once lived to watch over their loved ones, and the offspring of the ones they loved. They told me to watch the stars, that when one burned bright it meant that a spirit had found its home, and when one appeared that was not there before it meant that a new spirit was born, which is another way, an optimistic fashion, of saying a body ceased to live and the spirit passed on.

Nothing ever really leaves the world is what I discovered.

Another reason why I didn't want him, Marcel, to burn the woods down was because of the plague that would fall upon him for it. When I told him this later he laughed till he saw my face.

'You serious?'

'There would be no escape for you.'

'Maybe I did set it on fire.'

'But you didn't.'

'But the plague is real and cast over my very days.'

Had he taken my hand then like he wanted to we may have found a way.



We often had talks like that, you and I, remember? I sometimes wondered then if you meant it all, if what you said was believed by the you that spoke. At the time, it wasn't easy. You never made it easy, even when I wanted to. Even when I thought I could give to you what you always wanted, you ran from me and I chased after until you collapsed again, the gasoline everywhere, but, every time after the first, you burnt us. You engulfed me, too, your maddening inferno that spread to everything you touched.

I wanted to love you.



When we drove we drove far with the windows down and the music loud and cigarettes burning. You always smiled then, that first summer we spent together, inseparable. In all my life with you, those months were the most perfect. Free from anxiety, from thoughts of the future, from what it meant, from meaning at all. The obsessions of a meaningful life didn't weigh you down

or drown you yet so we flew then free like lovers even though our skin still never touched and never were we yet as intimate as that first night beneath the glowing moon.

You sang often then, singing loud, your body weaving with the melody behind the steering wheel. One hand passing cigarette from your teeth to the window while the other guided us forever in all directions, your face bombastic and blissful.

You once told me to remember you as a time of day, do you remember?

If I had to, it would have to be the witching hour. All those nights we spent in parks under the streetlights and the stars drinking cheap whiskey stolen from my parents, trying our hardest to forget the best nights of our lives. I never told you but I remember every word you said all those nights. All those times you talked of the heavens, of the hells, of the trepidations, of the hopes, I remember. Never did I admit when you pressed because you were different then, no longer that sweet brooding man who was halfmad and lovefull, but I do. There was a night you swung upside down serenading me in that falsetto you did because you said you couldn't sing but I loved your voice. I hear it sometimes when I'm alone in the woods I grew up in, the ones I missed while you lived.

But, rather than a time of day, I remember you as a time of year, and every summer, even still, even when you were still there with me but no longer the man I knew, I still longed for that summer and it made me lonesome even to have you around. Somehow I lost you to yourself and maybe I am to blame.

Sometimes I fear that I am.



I returned here. I belong here. To these woods. He took me away from here because he thought if I didn't belong to the woods then I would belong to him. For all of his intelligence, and he was the brightest man I ever met, brilliant in that wild way that only geniuses are, he never understood the way life worked, the way romance and love happened. From reading the many things he wrote, I thought that he must. No one could say these things without knowing, but, in the flesh, he was lost to the real world.

'It only makes sense up here,' he knocked knuckles on the side of his head, his other hand fiddling with rope. 'The whole world fits inside my head at night and I tease it all apart, pull strands to examine the way this exists or that,

but when I get out here with the light on, there're so many people and I get lost in faces that I can't remember, that I never imagined, and the whole of existence begins to slip through my fingers, unravelling at an alarming rate until all I have are a bunch of threads and a cracked snowglobe leaking that water that isn't water. And, because there's nothing to do about it, I shrug and let it fall, the threads blown by the breeze, the snowglobe shattered.'

The whole time you spoke, you twisted the rope into knots, tying and untying, tightening and loosening. Your eyes were cool fogs, 'The world in my head, the one I create, the one I keep on imagining, it makes sense. All this stuff out here,' you waved your hand, 'even you, it's all lost on me.'

Keep looking at me, I thought then. Just keep your eyes on mine and I'll figure it out.

But you didn't. Of course you didn't. You rolled back and put your arms behind your head staring into the sky. I placed my head on the edge of your arm but you didn't pull me close or move into me. You left me there on the edge.



After that first day, I woke up to you outside my front door waiting for me. My pap was talking to you. My pap was not a gentle man and was very protective of me. I never had another man in those years of youth that my pap liked, but he took to you. I came down and you two were laughing. What about, I don't remember.

'Vir, where'd this one come from?' My pap placed his big paw on your shoulder smiling, eyes the color of the sky, wide and bright.

'Uh,' my arms wrapped round me, barefooted, lifting each foot, alternating from left to right and back, 'the woods.'

He laughed that deep sonorous laugh from his stomach, 'Of course he did!' He slapped your back and pushed me towards you and went inside telling us to have fun.



For years he asked about you and wondered why we weren't married.

'We're not even dating.'

His face went serious, 'Still? You don't get ones like him often. Get back together with him.'

'We never dated.'

'You still saying that? He'll treat you right, Vir. He'll treat you the way you deserve.'



'**W**hat are you doing here?' I leaned my head to one side and pulled the hair behind my ear.

You looked around, hands shoved deep in pockets, shoulders high, you somehow lifted them higher while you raised both eyebrows, 'Came to see you.'

I stared at my feet, hiding my smile.

'Hey, come on,' you tossed your head back.

'Where?'

You shrugged again, eyebrows, too, 'Who cares?'

My hands were in the sleeves of my long teeshirt and I grabbed some hair, pulled it over my mouth, hiding the smile but you knew, 'Let me get dressed.' I turned and ran inside. You were the first boy to show up like that and I didn't even know you. I was only sixteen, maybe less, yet I knew that I would never meet another like you, no matter how long I lived.

When I came downstairs you were sitting with my parents, my mother beaming, her cheeks rosy the way they get when she was beside herself with joy. She thought I would

have to be a girl from then on. And I was. I think I became one that day.

Outside I asked where we were going.

'Your dad says you like the woods.'

I nodded, smiling.

'Wanna go there?' You pushed me playful like with your elbow.

'Uh huh.' My face flushed and I felt stupid for speaking like that, uh huh instead of yes or sure or yeah, but you smiled back and told me to come on. When we were out of range of windows and neighbors you lit two cigarettes and handed me one. My hands were iced claws but I smoked it because, I think, it was from you. You who I didn't even know, you who showed up at my house only hours after learning your name, only hours after stopping you from committing the greatest crime of your guilty life, you who spoke with my parents like old friends. Before I remembered to remember this time with you, we were amidst the trees that spoke to me.

I grabbed your arm, 'Come on.' And we ran. I lied then because I had no direction, but I needed you to chase me.

We came upon the dying stream that trickled water only just but left the soil thick and soft with mud. I stopped but you didn't, jumping over, then walking back through and offering your back. I laughed, your face peeking over

shoulder, and climbed on, your hands high on my thighs, my arms around your neck. You never knew this but I smelt you, almost put my nose right up to your hair. You smelt like days old clothes, like stale smoke, and staler beer. I stopped watching where we went because you never put me down, even when we passed the stream, and put my cheek to your back, the soft wool of that stupid peacoat found in a neighbor's garage that you never grew into. The sound of the woods, to me, fell away beneath the crunch of leaves and your breath. You stopped to light two more cigarettes and passed one to me on your back.

'Should I get off.'

'No, you're fine.'

'I'm too heavy.'

'Lighter than air.'

You shrugged me up higher on your back, my squeal releasing that girlish laughter from your lips.

Lying in the leaves making leaf angels, later you told me that was the moment you fell in love with me.

'The way you smiled only for me and tried to not meet my eyes. Your laughter and your perfect face.'

'Stop,' I covered my face with hair.

You pulled my hands away, cleared my face from hair, 'You're the most beautiful girl I have ever met.'

I threw my arms around you and smiled over your shoulder, my cheeks hurt when we let go.



You never thought I would remember this, did you? Not after all this time but I do. It was the most perfect time of my life. My entire future, the next thirty years, was set into motion because of those days with you from fall to summer and on into the following winter when life turned sour. But mostly it was those first months, that first year with you. That perfect year when we loved one another without shame, without thought. But never did we kiss or make love. I was fifteen and you sixteen, and I prefer to remember us like that always. You and I.



It didn't remain. Nothing ever stays the same, least of all the parts of life that involve him. He never held back the way a normal man does and held back in all the ways a normal man pushes forward. He did everything fullforced

except when it came to physical love. He hid from me when all he had to do was take me, was touch me.



The last time I saw him alive was many years after and even more ago. He was twenty nine and I was twenty eight still. I didn't know then it would be our last moment together. He was still going on about Sebastian Falke, still searching the country, the globe for even a word of his films. We were celebrating the publication of his first novel *I Wish He Belonged to Me*. This part isn't about his book, though.

His girlfriend Helena beside him, my husband Terry with me, and the many friends that he had made across the world all attended. I didn't know them and most the night was lonesome, the way many nights over the last decade had become with Marcel. Aloof and despondent with me but smiles and cheer with all else, appearing happy, and I believe he was.

The drunker he got, the more he danced, the more he sang, the more he flirted, and he flirted and danced with everyone, men and women. That was always his way, a magnificent tease, touching and feigning intimacy but

never going beyond public spectacle, always pulling away when the other's lust became more than just a game.

He cornered me for what would be our last conversation but not the last I heard from him. The music too loud in the room and we shouted into one another's ears.

'You've not read my book, I know, though I, do you remember, I sent it to you years ago back when it was a different book,' his eyes glassed over and I knew the only memory of the night he would retain would be of me leaving, even before it entered my mind to run.

'You know, for all these years, all these mad poet words, they've been for you, Gina.'

'Don't call me that,' I touched my neck and backed from him into the wall.

He put a hand on the wall to support himself beside my head, 'Every single word is because of you.'

'What about Helena?'

His head rocked drunkenly, confused, then he turned and looked round the room for her. 'She's fine. Fine. Pretty, French, the kind I always imagined was perfect.'

'She is perfect.'

He turned to me, suddenly sober, 'Virginia,' he looked around, 'I can't hear. Can we talk outside?'

I followed him out, the weather was cold, late summer and my dress had no arms or neck.

'Here,' he gave me his suitcoat, lit two cigarettes, and handed me one.

'I don't smoke.'

He kept his arm extended, stared at the one in his mouth and the one in his hand, 'Gonna make me smoke both.'

I took it and inhaled. I never have lost my love for cigarettes. No matter how many times I try to quit, I come back to luxuriate in the smoke.

He sat and I sat beside him.

'Gina,'

'Don't call me that,' a whisper through exhale.

'Right. Remember how we used to be? All those years ago when we were kids?'

'Yeah.'

'I miss that.'

'Me too.'

He looked at me and I returned his gaze. He spent years pouring his heart to me, bleeding on my sleeves, my shoes, on my very life and soul, but he said nothing. He stared and stared, his eyes turned to glass, not from drink but from something missing. He turned but I didn't. I watched him smoke his cigarette, his eyebrows furrowed, that sneer that he spent his life wearing unaware. It made people think he was angry or mean, but it was an unconscious mask for his boyish grin and girly laugh, both of which he never lost in

adulthood. He inhaled deep and blew out strong the way he always did. Smoking too audibly, like it was a show, like he was Mastroianni in Italy decades before his birth.

He turned back, my cigarette gone, his flicked into the street, 'Will you smoke just one more with me?'

I nodded.

'It's my last so we have to share.'

'Okay.'

He lit it, puffed twice and handed it to me. I puffed once, let it dangle in my fingers. I stopped watching him and put my head on his shoulder. He put an arm around me and pulled me close. Finally. I miss you, I said but, for the first time, he didn't say anything. After a lifetime of talking too much, he finally shut up and just held me.

We must have been like that a long time. Too long for some but not long enough, not for me, and I know not for him. I think a part of me knew I would never see him again because I cried. I didn't know it till we were back inside and Terry told me my makeup ran.

Helena burst outside. 'There you are! Everyone's waiting for you.'

He turned, 'Okay. Give me a sec.'

'Hurry up, we're waiting for your speech and I already had our song go twice but couldn't find you so I'm playing it again.'

He smiled and laughed and said he would be right in.

We stared at one another again, his arm no longer around me. He put a hand to my chin, then to my neck, and kissed me on the forehead. I'll never forget you, he said taking my hand and leaving a piece of paper there. Then he was gone. I knew what it said without opening it because they all say the same thing.



Do you remember writing those? All those tiny slips of paper you would put in my hand, slip in my purse, or leave in my shoe when you left. I kept them all. I have everything you wrote me. All in a shoebox upstairs that I keep secret and have done so for as long as I had known you.



Marcel never was quite like other men. Owing to his peculiar nature, he never could be, even when he tried hardest to assimilate. It made him intolerable, unforgettable, he was loved and hated for all the same reasons,

incorrigible and chaotic. He flew into fits, never of rage, but his bouts with himself, with the demons he spoke of everywhere lasted his entire life.

'They were my first memory. Staring over my mum's shoulder into this impenetrable blackness in the corner. I clung to my mum but she placed me there to sleep. Unaware, always unaware of the reason I never slept.'

'What are they like?'

You were far away, barely even talking to me, 'They're like shades and images. They swoop through the walls with faces of fire and ice and dive through my body, leaving me on fire or frigid. Hanging above my face visible even when I close my eyes, they sing a song that's always the same. A song I never remember but can't forget.'

Your knees pushed hard together, your teeth grinding, hands cold and tight, I touched you, a hand to shoulder. It was as if you awoke from deep sleep only to see my face buried in concern for you. You smiled the way I liked you to smile, bashful, like I caught you nicking candy.

'It's not a big deal.'

'You need to sleep.'

'I know,' far away again, your voice soft, hands tapping a beat on the concrete stairs beneath us. I waited for you to look up at me again, to return, but instead you smiled,

hopped to your feet, 'Let's go for a walk.' You bounced on one foot then the other.

We walked. This was later, much later, after we left home and our love was different. Still so in love with me, I could see the pain of being near, but I needed you. Never could understand that so you hid from me for months, not answering your phone, pretending like you forgot about me. You never knew how much that hurt, how much I needed you near.

I could not love you. I tried so long ago.

Our walks were different then, not through woods and over streams, me piggybacked. Wide streets and sidewalks, traffic lights and noise, a pace apart, but you still lit cigarettes for two even though I always had my own. By then you smoked Red Puffins because you asserted they were best and I think it was one of many steps you took from me, picking a brand I didn't know, something we didn't discover together, and making it a part of your whole.

'Never thought I'd say it, but I miss the squirrels.'

Taken by surprise, I choked on smoke and laughed, 'The squirrels?'

You didn't turn to see my face but you knew I smiled. I knew from the way you kept your lips tight to hide your own. 'Yeah, all those squirrels back home. It's one of those things, the little ones, that people never think about. Never

did it occur to me when I went to college that I'd miss having squirrels everywhere. Never even expected there to be a place squirrels didn't run.'

I blew smoke, the way the Puffin confined my lungs and constricted the way I breathed, there was something reminiscent of you in them. A way, a kind of madness that wanted everything without giving anything.

'They're an odd creature, vaguely human. Those little hands,' you wiped your hands back and forth mimicking a squirrel or a vaudeville villain, 'almost human but not. It's unsettling a little bit. Always imagine they're up to something, some nefarious plot.'

'Out to steal your nuts.'

You laughed and turned to me, finally, 'Yeah, exactly. I miss that, always looking over my shoulder to make sure a squirrel wasn't off stealing my horde of nuts.'

'I miss the trees.'

'You would.'

'I do.'

We walked. Spring, the weather getting warm, that stupid peacoat still draped over your bony shoulders, your haggard jeans, more hole than material, kept falling so you kept pulling them up.

'You need a belt.'

'Got one but the loops all broke. See.'

Every loop missing, I can't say I was surprised then the way clothes and appearance never meant much to you. But your shoes always were leather, fine and dressy. You looked a mess, a chaos of patterns and styles. I used to dress you better.

It seemed like hours later when the gloaming hit and we were sitting in that concrete park with artificial waterfalls not yet turned on for the year. Do you remember what you said then?

'It looks like a giant's stairway.'

It did. Big rectangles of concrete reaching up and up for no reason. From any other direction it was a mountain of concrete but from this one it was a stairway to the land of giants.

'Gina,' the night came and left us beneath that starless sky. The air chilled the way it does in spring and our breath condensed afore us. Or maybe that was the smoke, the Puffin spilling from my tightened lungs.

'I miss the stars,' I said to stop whatever it was you wanted to say.

'I miss you.'

'You needn't. Answer your phone every once and again.'

You rolled onto your back, exhaling smoke loud but not on purpose, 'I'm sorry.'

So many thoughts raced through my head, like what my boyfriend thought because I didn't answer when he called. You could do that to me, remove me from my life, even from my loves, if only for a day. I think that's all you wanted at times, a chance to recollect how a part of me had always and would always belong to you. I thought of you beside me. We drifted apart over the previous three years. We were so in love once but it fell apart and it broke you to pieces. You stood outside my house some nights. I know because I saw you but I never told anybody about that. Neither did I tell anyone about the letter you left on my door, all thirty pages of it typed up but with the manic sentences of a sleepless night. It was the first of many. It began as an apology then worked its way to a love letter then on past to an accusation and drifted near suicide note then back to love and full circle to apology.

Even in despair and calamity your words delved deep and cut to my soul. The love you had for me, the love you shared so readily, so fully, it frightened me. So in love with me that you were ready to die if only for my touch. I have them all, the thirty or forty you wrote me from the end of high school till your insane quest across the globe chasing the ghost of films that may not have ever even been. This was before then but when I look now I see that the seeds were already there taking root.

'Gina.'

'Marcel.'

'You're perfect right now.'

I pulled my hair over my face, my smile not meant for you anymore.

'Pensive and thoughtful, a thousand miles away. If I was a painter I'd paint you here for the rest of my life.'

'You paint.'

You laughed, 'Throwing paint at pieces of paper doesn't count.'

'I like them.'

'They're fun but they're not paintings. Not the way I mean when I look at you.'

'Stop.'

'Gina,'

'No.'

'I love you.'

I started walking away then. My face and mind a battlefield of memories and dreams and emotions, and I longed for the woods and the treespirits because they never tugged me so, always consoled me when I got lonesome.

You followed me all the way home, five steps behind. When I got to my door your face was masked in smoke and shadow.

'You ruin everything sometimes.'

Your hands deep in pockets, biting down on the cigarette, its ember aglow, 'I know.' The words barely got to me before they were carried away by the breeze. I went inside but watched you from my room.

You smoked two more cigarettes on the stoop, your elbow on your knees, hand pressed to forehead. I made a promise then that if you looked back to my room I'd forgive you and walk home beside you. It wasn't the first time. It began long ago that I made bets with myself concerning you. Small ones at first, that if you called between this and this minute that I'd answer with I love you, but those were the first ones. Later they became promises that if you just kissed me I'd stay, if you wrapped your arm around me I'd promise to never let you go.

But you got up and ambled away, slow, giving yourself lots of time to see me there but you never turned, the smoke trailing behind.

Days later while going through my purse I found two notes on tiny pieces of paper. One said, I love you. The other said, I'm sorry.



There's this old belief and there was a time when studies were always being done that appeared to prove it. We can recreate the past and bring it back to life through words. They were called Creation Compositions. Some memories never let go. Marcel never could let me go but I find more with age that neither can I him. If a person can capture their memories proper and set it all down on paper then that person comes back. Not just the way memories come back but the way that a lost friend returns.

I didn't mean to but I had to.

My husband, George, he doesn't know. Neither do the kids but they're mostly gone but for Marcel. He's the age now that you were when we met. I think I named him so because I knew he was my last chance to bring you back. I thought if a name could mean anything then maybe it could mean so much more.

He's more you than he is his mother or father.

I write when he's gone working and the house is quiet and lonely. Sometimes I sit in the woods with just a pen and this notebook. I never was a writer so it takes me a long time to go. Some days I only get down a sentence or two. Most days only a word. I ask the trees what they remember about us. You know what they say?

They say we were in love.

I told them that it wasn't so and they laughed the way trees do, which is to shake out a leaf or two. Then I told them about the years we lost one another and about all the many things I did to you. All the pain I put you through without ever trying. They know about you and they understand or help me to understand better. I told them about the letters. At first they laughed but I read them a few, the first and the last one. They cried. I never did hear a tree cry before that but I sat out there for a full four hours reading those letters to them and moments got punctuated by a loud creak like a scream and it brought tears to my own eyes after all these years.

I bet you never thought I would read those again and again but I know them all by heart. Every word.

After that they began to understand. They told me that our love belonged to them. We belonged in the forest. They tell me that that's the real reason I came home. I looked for you.

Maybe they're right. They believe it so.

And maybe you're right. You were right, I mean.

I can hear you now even, your voice soft the way you always told me when you would say, You don't deserve to be lonely. Your breath warm on my neck, me wrapped in your arms.

It was a love we shared without trying. It lasted half your life no matter how long we spent apart.

I miss you so.

But all I have now are the memories so I'm trying to write it all down the way you always did. You were the writer not me. But what you wrote buried this all so deep that only I knew. You knew I would know and that's why you gave it to me first. It was the longest of your letters.

I read it to the trees today. The story of the time we shared. I explained how you inverted us, made me the boy and you the girl but wrote from my perspective. There was a boy who meets a girl near the ocean and right away the girl loves him. For months they grow into one with their identities so bound within the other that separating for even moments was painful. They woke in the night and called the other who shared the same dream. They spent their days together and their nights sneaking out to sit beneath the moon and her sister stars. The world began to collapse around them but they stood in the center of it all as if it was not real until an eclipse shattered the sky and they lost one another for the first time. The boy searched for the girl who searched for the boy but only ever found his echo. The boy whispered to the girl everywhere he went to try to show her the way out of the night and she stumbled after him for years only to find him the same,

unchanged despite the years. You wrote about a girl who loved a boy and a boy who never could decide if he loved her back or not. It ends the way it begins. On accident and ambiguous.

I never got to tell you what I think of your book. The only one of the many you wrote to see the world during your life. They're all published now. Did you know that? You're famous.

I think you planned that the way you planned so many things. That no one would be stupid enough or brave enough to follow through on.

The trees cried again and told me to speak no more of you because they could not take it. They said emotions were different after death. A body can feel while alive but in death one must relive perpetually the emotions and there's no body to distil or balance the sensations of grief and loss and pang. After death there is only the emotion unburdened and unhampered by consciousness and body rhythm. Their tears startled me and I won't return tomorrow.

The rest is up to me.

I wish you were here. I would ask you what I never did and I would ask you if it was because of me.

Your book ends without ending but you wrote the ending with your death, I suppose. So much of our life is

that book, despite the magic you buried it under, that it couldn't end in words.

I know that now but I wonder if I even could have given you a different ending.



My favorite note he ever wrote was simple: Please, remember me fondly.



I never quite knew what you loved more once we became separate people, me or the films. 'I'm on a journey through time and across continents' was how you described it to me when I asked you what you did so many nights without sleep and your eyes blacked out by forgotten hours before a screen.

'What did you watch?'

Summer then, it must have been because you called me. You missed me most in summer. So do I. My shirt stuck to my back and your brow was speckled with sweat. It smelt like rain and later it would and you would say to me, I hope

it rains forever. I knew what you meant. Our hands held then for the first time in years and I made another promise when I heard that but instead you told me to follow and I did though the rain was heavy and warm and my jeans wouldn't fit right later and I had no other clothes. You gave me—do you remember?—an old shirt and shorts that I kept until a move or two later when they disappeared. They smelt like you even after two washes and I wore them when I slept. My boyfriend then didn't like them but they never did. Every single one hated you because they knew and could see your love for me.

'Oh man, watched so many things lately. *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, most importantly, probably. It's wild, shot all in close ups and it makes you dizzy and it makes you crazy but it's perfect and it makes your heart fall through your chest and your eyes roll back in your head till you're catatonic from her eyes, that fierceness, like a caged beast, like the hand of god.'

When you talked about what you loved you became someone new. No matter the depressions or the anxieties or the misfortunes, film turned you sprightly and that mad gleam entered your wide eyes and your lips curled at the edges of your mouth and it stayed open until you remembered the cigarette turned halfash in your hand.

'Good then?'

'Like nothing I've ever seen before and it was made eighty years ago. I can't believe that, that this guy, Carl Dreyer, could do so much so long ago.'

You talked about him for days and tracked down all his films, then it was Renoir and Kurosawa, Ozu and Lang, Huston and Welles, and then you ran into France and walked through Truffaut, Malle, Godard, Melville, and others I could never remember.

We lost track of one another again for the reason we always did. I met someone new and you sunk beneath the horizon writing me letters faster than I could read and then hiding for months refusing to see or speak to me. I think you were the reason so many of my relationships fell apart back then.

Neither of us knew how to be happy without the other but neither could we be together.

'The problem is that you're perfect for me but I'll never be even good enough for you.'

Reading that broke my heart for the hundredth time. I know you didn't mean to because you were so hurt but you could often times be right brutal.

When we came together I always asked you about films so I could see you smile. Elsewise you were somber and forlorn. I hated to see you like that because a part of me thought it was my fault. Even though you threw all your

knife edge words at me for so many months, I always felt that I hurt you and not the other way.

But you did, Marcel. You hurt me in ways that no one else ever could.

It was during this time away from me that your journey through time and across the globe truly began. I didn't believe but then I watched it unfold.

'There's this film by Adolph Sarre,' your words slurred together from the excitement. Unable to even break up syllables long enough to make the words distinct, such was the manic look in your eye and I knew it had been too long since you slept.

'Who?'

'Doesn't matter. I'm going to Paris, though.'

'When's the last time you ate?'

'What? Who gives a shit. I'm talking about moving.'

'Let's get something to eat.'

We walked to that café we breakfasted at sometimes. Your volatile body could only just contain the way your mind raced and I knew you hadn't given this any thought and that you must have only found out about this hours before. I didn't let you talk until you ordered and only a few words until you ate all your eggs.

'Let's go, I need a cigarette.' Your hands shook and you blinked too often. I feared you were about to combust right there in front of me.

You lit two and gave me one even though I told you I didn't want one but I smoked it all the same. Red Puffin.

'You're wrong, Gina, I have thought about it a lot. All day.'

'Don't call me that.'

You stopped for the first time, your eyebrows squeezing your eyes down. 'What?'

'Virginia.'

'What?'

'Don't call me Gina. I don't like it.'

You stared at me for a second as if to say, Who cares, and I knew that's what you thought until a new expression washed over your face like an eclipse and your eyes turned cold and sorrowful. I think I burst you out of the mania you glided through that day. Burst your heart and reminded you that I was lost to you. Oh, you said.

'You can't move to France.'

'I am, though.' You spat out your cigarette and shoved your hands deep into your pockets and your gait slowed the way it did when you were about to tell me something I didn't want you to. You watched the pavement beneath

our feet the way I always did but I kept glancing up hoping your eyes would meet me in the middle.

'Why?'

'I'm moving for the year. Study abroad. I already got the paperwork.'

'You don't even speak French.'

'I'm learning.'

'But why?'

'For film.' The answers were all short and I lost you again without trying.

'I'll miss you.'

'I already do.'

Stabbed through the stomach is how it felt. The only thing that kept me walking was the heat and the sweat. The smell of cut grass and our shoes staining green beneath our feet. I wanted to scream at you and cry and make you look at me but you never did.

And he went to France. We made up before then and it became our new tradition. Our friendship bloomed every time he left again to wander other worlds and when he left I had another letter at my door or shoved onto the sill. Another one of those masterpieces of love and apology and accusation. Never was I sure that he would return alive from the way he wrote. He burnt from both ends and

from all sides. His death was always on my mind the way I knew it was always on his.

He returned after a year of brief communications. I e-mailed him and he responded within hours but I never could. His life was so different there than it was in America. He wrote me pages and pages and pages but all I returned to him were sentences about a new man and loneliness weeks after his latest tome. In between he wrote letters full of songs and poems he wrote and theories about art he had.

By the end of that year apart we couldn't recognize one another.

He told me about *The Death of Marat* but I don't remember. He talked for days about it but never wrote anything down in his letters to me about it. I could read about it now if he had.



Late at night I can't sleep so I sneak out of bed and write down my memories of him and I pretend he hears my pencil scratching through the wall. Often times I page through his many letters. Some of the pages yellowed

and others have stains from when I was too young to know how important they were.

I like it best here when the moon comes round to show her face to me. If not for you always referring to the moon as a she I would likely still believe the moon was a man. She flowers strong tonight before me and I even shut off the lamp to write in her glow. The page lost to my eyes but my hands got good at knowing a page from touch and the pencil runs smooth for now.

Easiest now to recreate you when I cannot see what it is that I do. Your grey eyes and your crooked nose and the acne scars that only become visible when I'm too close. You were always ashamed of them but never did they look so noticeable or bad as you believed.

This is the way you returned to me all these years since you left me for eternity. That young man of sixteen or seventeen smoking cigarettes barefoot on his roof in a peacoat too large, silhouetted by the beckoning moon.

'I believe in the tide and I believe in her,' your crooked finger aimed like a gun to the night sky.

My arm pressed into the crook of your arm, we really were perfect then that spring before our first summer and the misfortunes brought on by that fall.

'I believe in death.'

A different time near the end of our unforgettable year. Sixteen, in love and perfect, always. When fall hit and the leaves turned so did you and everything fell by the time the trees were bare.

'He asked me to be his girlfriend.'

'I know.'

'How?'

'I saw it in you months ago.'

He sought for signs back then. Always taken by his obsessions for his entire life. For so long it was death, especially his own death and mortality. If his life kept any consistent note then that was it. His obsession with his death and it's how he ended it all so many years later.

Meaning and semantics and theme and reason and threads existed everywhere in his head and he took the slightest of my expressions or the tone of my voice as an indicator of some bad omen or oncoming doom.

Never did it last because of his inability to be. To simply be and stop thinking.

'Gina, I want to tell you something.'

The wind turned cold and that moon was the last we would share like that. I never expected him to turn from me but he did. He drank to die after that and buried his dreams underground. He never recovered from the fact that romance happened to me beyond him and that I did

not want his love anymore. Time went by and I waited for him to speak but he didn't. 'Tell me.' I didn't look at him because I feared what I would see there so I stayed in the crook of his arm with my head on his shoulder and hand on his ribcage.

'I won't survive my thirtieth year.'

'Don't talk like that.'

'I won't survive my life.'

'Stop.'

'I need to tell you.'

'Don't.'

'I've seen it a hundred times for a hundred days and maybe it's what drove you away, the fact that I've been so distant and crazy but I can't sleep or think or do anything anymore. All I can think of is you and when it's not you it's the death I know waits for me thirteen years from now. I'm not afraid and I'm ready but there's so much I need to do before then. And when I die I want you to be there. Promise me you'll be there.'

His voice stayed steady and I knew what it meant but I never believed. The wind howled and an owl made that noise owls make, which I never thought sounded like a hoot or even who but more like a song that forgot all the instruments. His heart beat against my hand but he wasn't nervous or afraid. His hand rubbed my arm from elbow

to shoulder with added pressure to keep me from the cold and to remind me of him.

'Promise me.'

'I can't,' I whispered and I didn't believe he heard me but I know he did.



His year in France did nothing to quell his wanderlust. If anything it only ballooned it to magnificent proportions. He talked his whole life about leaving but I never did believe till he left for France only to return another man who was welcomed by a me that was no longer the one he knew. He lived a lifetime in that year abroad but for the first time I had not aged with him.

He was alone. His eyes carried his lonesomeness but he spoke nothing of it ever again. Not to me at least.

His journey continued and he dropped college to search the world for films that no one else had seen or heard of. He found reels of Lang films in South America and Kurosawa in Poland and unheard of Kieslowski in Ukraine. He never even told me how he funded the first trip to Denmark chasing the myth of Dreyer's original reels for *The Passion of Joan of Arc* but after he discovered a few

prints his reputation grew though he never did find Dreyer's original.

He wrote me letters even then and somehow knew always where I was though I imagine many of his words got lost to the changes my address made in those years.

For five years he wandered the globe chasing the ghosts of celluloid. I fell in love with Terry during that time and we married before Marcel returned.

On my wedding day there was an enormous package from him filled with pages and pages and pages but also a congratulations and a hope for my happiness.

Promise me you will always be happy. One line caught amidst a maelstrom of chaos and I feared again that he died writing to me and that the man who finally found his way home to me would be another yet.



Who is Sebastian Falke? It was the first question I had when Marcel rang our doorbell at three in the morning the Christmas Eve of our first nuptial year.

He shivered horribly and kept stamping his leather shoes to remain warm. A new man with new clothes and even a new peacoat that fit him. More handsome than I

remembered and he was dressed well. I had never seen him wear a collar or wear a tie or own clothes that didn't have at least a few holes but there he stood through my bleary eyed gaze in a tailored three piece suit and well cut peacoat. He left a petulant vagabond and returned a foppish dandy but still he bit the end of his cigarette and kept his hands shoved deep in pant pockets.

I opened the door to his smile and he spat out the cigarette, 'I know what I need to do, what comes next,' but before he could continue my arms swung round him and he held me until I cried and muttered, I missed you so much.

When he finally brought me inside and we sat the mania filled his eyes and voice again the same way I remember him always being halfmad and fully in love but this time it was only the movies. He spoke too fast and his accent had lost it's place amidst the years he spent away. Vaguely English or Scottish and maybe even bits of German and French invaded his intonation and cadence. He spoke quietly the way he never before had. His lines made no sense and he talked until the sun began to climb over the horizon about a man I never had heard of and even still only know through Marcel. It was an hour before I got a word in and I never got a chance to ask him the questions that mattered like where he had been and what he had seen or who he was

now or a hundred different things because all that came out of my mouth was, 'Who is Sebastian Falke?'

'He's who I've been talking about all night and the man I've been looking for since before I knew I needed to know him. But I know where he is, I think. I heard whispers of him all over Europe and Asia but no one had seen him and only a handful had ever seen what he did but he's why I had to come home.'

'You came here to tell me about a director?'

'Yes, but he's not just a director. He's the spirit of cinema and the genius lost in the reels of time. He's the voice of American artistry that everyone turned deaf to and I think it killed him and it may have killed his work because no one knows what happened to it and all that exist are a few reviews here and there that laud him as a genius and ridicule him as a buffoon.' He slowed for the first time and his voice got even quieter when he finally continued. We sat in the halfit morning with only the sound of the house breathing and his soft voice. He lowered his head and stared at the floor between us and then raised his eyes to see though his head still bowed, 'I came here straight from the airport, too, to see you. I came here to tell you my next step as a Christmas present.'

Terry came down the stairs then and met Marcel for the first and one of the few times. Marcel was visibly agitat-

ed by him and never did make eye contact. He was polite, however, and cordial and tried to express enthusiasm and well wishes for us and give Terry a few compliments, though he always referred to him as Terrence, which Terry hated. After moments that felt like hours of awkwardness Marcel smiled, 'I forgot why I came,' and pulled out his phone and had a very short conversation that mostly sounded like he kept repeating Hi. He went to the door a moment later and a tall Asian woman entered holding a stack of papers. I felt embarrassed and crossed my arms because I stood in pyjamas when this beautiful stranger with long black hair and fashionable clothes and high heels strolls in from the cold wearing a long black overcoat.

'Gina, this is for you.' He handed me the stack of papers and the first one read,

I Wish He Belonged To Me

a novel

Marcel Maddox

'What is it?'

'It's my next step and it's for you. Merry Christmas.'

I felt uncomfortable but couldn't place a name on why.

'Well, we must be going.'

My head cleared of the noise and anxieties, 'Where?'

He looked to the Asian woman who nodded and then back to me, 'California.'

I shook my head before the words came, 'Why?'

His smile bloomed like a flower across his face the way it did all those years before. Seven years gone by and though we had changed so much and nothing was the same it was also true that nothing had really become different. 'To find Sebastian Falke.'

Terry shook his hand and they exchanged goodbyes and nice to meet yous but I couldn't yet let go of him after so long and it hurt me and my heartbeat shuddered from being pulled in too many directions too quickly. 'Won't you at least stay for Christmas?'

He looked to the woman who was his biographer whose name I would discover to be Miho and her face was unreadable to me but he turned to me once more, 'No, we really must be going.'

The tears clawed at my throat and welled in my eyes and I no longer could meet his gaze. I hugged him and took in the scent hoping it was the same but all I smelt was the cold air.

An hour later I found the note when it fell out of my ear: I love you even still, forever.



It set a precedent, the way he gave me his book to read before it was ready. It wouldn't be published for five years and I think that he did that on purpose. Waited so long. He was right when he said that I didn't read it because I didn't. Terry did and he urged me to because he said it was fantastic but I couldn't. Not yet is what I thought. I was punishing him for the way he disappeared only to disappear again chasing more phantoms of film across the world.

Miho became his sole executor of his work after he left life. He had nine unpublished novels by the time his life ended and only the one to see the light of day and every Christmas for nine consecutive years following his death a manuscript arrived at my door. Each one the next novel to keep him alive and so he lived on not for me only but for the world who only knew him through his writing and Miho's biography. More and more words.

His biography was titled *A Happy Death* and it detailed the many moments I would have liked to keep private. I would blame the collapse of Terry and my marriage on that book but it started that Christmas Marcel came to my door in slivers and cracks that rent us apart and we separated three years after his death.

Between all that we had a baby girl with his chestnut eyes and curly hair. If ever I did something right in that decade

it surely was having a hand in her creation. Never did I know a child to smile and laugh so but the decade after was hard what with the divorce. Her mother died with a man she never loved who took both their lives with him and her daddy treated her well but we spoke sparingly and I imagine that was the worst for her. My Genevieve. She's a woman now. An artist and painter with long black hair that rings round her head and dark eyes that melt men's knees but all her life she kept men away and gave herself to solitude.

So unlike her parents that I fear at times that she belongs to another couple. She smokes Red Puffins and bites the end the way Marcel always did.

Marcel's novels: *I Wish He Belonged to Me*, *The Death of the Sun*, *The Birth of the Moon*, . . . *And then the Rain*, *The Bird and the Cat*, *Half-Beaten Heart*, *Songs of the Living*, *Take Me With You*, *Euripides*, and *Au Revoir, mes Enfants*.

Tales of madness and tales of love always touched with melancholy and magic as if the rules of the world were unstable and inconsistent. *The Bird and the Cat* was a children's novel dedicated to Genevieve and I let her read it first and I think it was the moment she became a daughter but not mine. His obsessions shined through what with all the talk of death which he always capitalized and then

the everpresent love that never could find a way to work out right. Each one, even the happy ones like *Songs of the Living* were imbued with a deep and troubling sorrow. It was a collection of short stories all interconnected and linked about the life and love of being young and even though the endings all came happily it somehow makes it more sad. Even when he described glee and tenderness it tended to read anguished as if even pleasure was wrought with tragedy.

Many of them were about me or at least contained bits of me and our life. *I Wish He Belonged to Me*, . . . *And then the Rain*, *Au Revoir, mes Enfants*, and *Euripides* followed the tale of our short love and long friendship in great detail albeit hidden beneath all the magic and calamity of his apocalyptic vision of the world and humanity. . . . *And then came the Rain* dealt with his many failed relationships with women exclusively and he never even tried to hide it behind a curtain like he did with the others. Through it I met the women who loved him but who he never could bring himself to love back and there I am at the center of it like the eye of his romantic hurricane but also the one who caused the storm and tore the world apart.

I can't read that one anymore and only read it the first time when it showed at my door.

Au Revoir, mes Enfants was the last to be published and it came on the tenth anniversary of his death. He planned it all, didn't you? You knew what you were doing before we ever even had a chance. You looked a decade in advance and smiled when you took knife to throat. If there's any comfort in any of it then it must be that you believed in yourself at the end. Finally. It was your goodbye and meditation on suicide and Death and what it meant. More an essay than a novel in that even the narrator's name was Marcel Maddox who had a long history of failed love but was so full of it that life lost all the meaning that he searched for so long.

Miho's biography came out the following year and I believe he planned that, too. His relationship was never sexual or romantical with Miho but I believe he loved her and she loved him. Maybe most of all. Maybe even more than he loved me. Poor Helena is what I often thought after all of this. Poor Helena who had been with him the last two years of his life. She never understood and it tore her apart more than the rest of us. She even came to my door a few years after his death and during my divorce. Of course it didn't help reconciliation with Terry that I talked for two days about the man who loved me enough to take me from him even after dying.

Helena met Marcel in Germany while he was scouring libraries for Kurosawa's full print of *The Idiot*. She be-

came caught in his mad wake the way many women fell to him. He ate the hearts of every woman he ever met and they loved him deeply for his eccentricity and genius and electricity and beauty but they never loved him for being Marcel.

It's the secret no one knows but Miho and me. It's why he loved us. We didn't care that he was an artist or that he lived his life the way he did which was surely extravagant and magnificent but we loved him for the man that he was when no one was around.

I never heard Miho utter a word of English but in reading her book I knew more about her love likely than she. Marcel treated her poorly at first and refused to allow her to follow him. She had discovered him in Beirut while he dug through discarded reels for I can't remember what. Maybe nothing the way I sometimes dig through discount bins in case I get lucky. He bought her a drink because she's pretty and he spoke fragments of Japanese but she would teach him much more. After a week of friendship wherein they never stopped talking she decided to follow him and tell his tale. Like him she was lost in the movies and barely here in the proper world where life doesn't have three acts and resolutions.

He made it hard on her and constantly tried to lose her for their first two years but she never stopped and though

she doesn't say why it became obvious to me after the first page of her book. After all the running and following he grew to accept her as his partner in life.

Miho, I've known you all these years but never met you. You're my life partner, the only friend I have and maybe the only one I ever did, but I don't know you.

I had no words and didn't speak because it was always him, Marcel, who had words, not just for me and for him, but for all of us. All the world spoke through his mouth.

Tell me.

Tell you what, I said.

Tell me who you are.

Depressed and despondent, he lied in bed for days and didn't eat anything or wash. I brought him meals and juice but he refused everything besides water. I turned on films to rouse him but he rioted and demanded I turn them off and he told me not to come back but I always did, only to sit next to his bed and wait. Wait for what came next. And in that moment that lasted for weeks, he wanted to know me, the woman who had stayed by him for most a decade while he raced across the globe searching for Sebastian Falke who we never found. He told me, not as a demand, but sincerely, to let him inside my life the way he had given his life to me all these years.

And I told him and when I was done he held me for the first and only time. The only time our bodies touched.

And he called me his Moon. He was the shore.

It was the month before his thirtieth birthday. The book ends shortly after that. It ends with flowers and tears on his grave and Miho promising the rest of her life to his dream, to give what was left of hers to the life of Sebastian Falke.



Miho never spoke to me in words. By all accounts she only spoke in actions and that's how my correspondence with her has been, albeit one sided. I never have been able to track her or discover even a whisper of her whereabouts but she knows where I am and sends me something of his every Christmas. Sometimes it's only a slip of paper and sometimes it's pages from a journal he once kept. She sends me the words that she knows matter to me which are the ones about our youth. Tender memories every Christmas and because of it I cry at least once a year.

These gifts are the only reason I know that Miho still lives and searches for Sebastian Falke. Sebastian Falke, cin-

ema's rogue auteur who disappeared and turned to a ghost before anyone cared.



When Marcel returned from California several months later we met again.

'Did you find him?'

'Only a name etched in stone.'

'Oh.'

'All traces of him, gone.' He threw his hand out and opened it up as if indicating a puff of smoke. 'We even thought we may have found a place where his films were, at this little library in I don't remember where. We got there and found nothing. The librarians had never watched the films but acknowledged that they were real and housed in their stacks. I told them they were gone but they didn't believe me so I showed them the god damn stack of movies. Not a single one by Sebastian Falke, just a bunch of Disney movies and the like.' Miho stood behind him and looked down at me. Her porcelain face betraying no emotion. She always appeared as a statue to me. Something that a master artisan crafted out of marble and moonlight.

'Then the librarian tells me about a teenage girl who used to watch them over and over a few years ago. She said she remembered her specifically because she watched those strange movies where people never spoke and because she smelt homeless. But there was no girl and no more films and no way to track a homeless girl in California. She stole the tapes that had been sitting on that shelf for at least a decade and now they're lost out in the gutters. I, we, searched there, too, for months but it's hopeless.' His movements erratic and shifting between almost convulsive to immobile.

'So what now?' We were twenty five and I barely knew him anymore and it made me shy and confused to be near. Our past and our present swirled around us and a glance now became a look from seven years before and the movement of his hand made us sixteen again or the way he bit his lip made us strangers which is what we were then.

He leaned back and stretched his arms causing Miho to step back and they somehow never touched, 'No idea. Miho thinks we should take a break. Maybe stick around here for a while or go back home.'

'Where's home,' my voice shook from fear of what he may have considered home by then.

You smiled for the first time and you were holding a gastank and matches again, 'Home. Our home. Maybe go see my parents and yours.'

The heat burst through my chest and covered every inch of my face and then he laughed the same old laugh, 'Where did you think?'

I pulled on my hair and covered my mouth with it hiding my smile, 'I don't know.'

He laughed and so did I and I forgot Miho was there.

'You still sound like a girl when you laugh.'

'I'm still the same boy.'

Were you? I wondered then and wonder now if it was only me that changed or if it was the space between us that had changed.



Terry came home with me to stay with our parents and to tell them I was pregnant. Finally, my mother said and hugged Terry. Pap shook his hand only and nodded.

'I talked to Marcel yesterday,' Pap told me.

'They talked all day,' mum rolled her eyes but smiled big. 'He's become a real man.'

'And what a life!' Pap never lost his love for you. He talked about you all through the day and about Miho who never seemed to leave your side then. Pap and mum talked so long about you that Terry got forgotten and it was as if the baby I housed in my womb was there now because you had returned home and not because of the love Terry and I shared.

It was a hard week on Terry and those slivers of distance between us turned to cracks that allowed many trouble to seep into our short marriage. He didn't like the time I spent with you.

'He was my best friend and only barely returned. I've seen him only a handful of times in five years so of course I want to spend time with him.'

'You're not married to him.'

'That's why it shouldn't bother you.'

Terry was angry but he was a gentle man and bottled things he was afraid to say because he never wanted to hurt me even when the divorce happened. He let me have anything I wanted so long as we shared custody of Genevieve. Only thing was that I didn't want anything. Not the house or the money or the car.

Rough shape. That's how I was in the days of the divorce and it wasn't Terry's fault or anybody's except for mine and all the regret I didn't even know was in me concerning you.

It took me years to believe it wasn't me that killed you.
Years.

Terry believed I loved you still and I did but not how he meant. Even when I stopped loving you I always loved you but it wasn't the way you wanted either.

We walked through the woods the way we used to and you lit two cigarettes and handed me one.

'Baby.'

Talking through the side of your mouth because of the cigarette in your teeth, 'What?'

'I'm pregnant.' I flushed and watched our feet.

'Oh, shit. Seriously?'

I nodded.

You spat out the cigarette and tossed the one for me down.

I couldn't meet your eyes but felt them on me.

'How long?'

'Only found out a few weeks ago.'

It was late summer. August I think. The air was dry and hot and the only sound was our feet kicking dirt. Even here you stayed dressed well, in pants, a collared shirt, and those leather shoes.

'If I was young, I'd run from here.'

'You did.'

'You came with.' The smile was evident in your voice and I realized it was the first time I had seen you in so long without Miho's presence. Ever since you came back Miho was always beside you even though she never spoke. At least not to me. My parents said she was funny. I can't imagine that. Sometimes I forget that pretty women are normal people like the rest of us and that they can be funny or angry or sad too. To me Miho will always be that statuesque beauty from somewhere I can't pronounce in a country I've never seen but for video.

'I hated you for a while after you left.'

'I know.'

'Even before you went to France, I lost you.'

'I'm sorry.'

I didn't look up but knew from your voice that you watched the ground before us go by as I did.

'It really hurt me.'

You paused and said nothing for a while and then, 'I know.' But the pause mattered more than what came next. That single pause held all the anguish of your years away from me. The loneliness you found so deep within that no woman you met could ever fill it and make you whole because you gave too much away to me when we were only children. I'm sorry, Marcel. I didn't know then. I knew but I didn't know how deep it cut and how fractured your

heart had grown. Later, years later, you told me that all your heart had splintered and broken to pieces but for the part that separated ventricles which is at the very center. 'It belongs to you and every beat, even since before I met you, has been for you.'

It's why I couldn't see you die.

I belonged to another but you always had me.

'You don't deserve to be lonely, Gina.' These words broke me from all the thoughts sweeping through me from the forest. The voices of the treespirits were loud that day but you never heard them and I never told you.

How long will you stay with me is what they said and I didn't understand that till today.



We remained there for a week when he and Miho left once more to keep chasing Sebastian Falke. Some words need to be said about Sebastian Falke.

I don't believe he ever really did exist and I wouldn't put it past Marcel making the whole thing up because if he believed strong enough he could make the whole world believe along with him. And I never have heard a word about him since Marcel spent that week and that Christ-

mas before telling me about him and the work he may or may not have created. The thing is too that even Marcel never saw any evidence of his work outside of hearsay and reviews and the odd person he sought down to ask about this unfamed filmmaker. Never did he lay eyes on a film. Not one.

Everything I know about him was from Marcel and he was obsessed enough to spend the last third of his life devoted to discovering him.

Sebastian Falke was the director of ten short films and one feature length film. His films were reviled and lauded often at the same times, it seems. I can't tell it right even though I'm trying. It reads like a book report and losing the magic of his, Marcel's, words. His eye went wide and bright and he leant forward as if he looked over a great precipice that towered above the ocean and within that ocean was Sebastian Falke floundering and if only Marcel could keep leaning and keep reaching and keep looking then he would find that single wave that would take Sebastian Falke from the edge of dreams and the ghosts of the past and recreate him the way I try now to bring you back from your death that seems so long ago but closer with each sentence I write.

At night in the shadows, I believe they are yours.

Winter has come upon me and so I still haven't finished but I feel as if you're closer to me than you have been in years or even decades. I think that if only I can make sense of Sebastian Falke then you will come up from behind and place a hand to my shoulder like you did when I was lost in my thoughts at the library. I forget so much about you. The way you smell. I had forgotten for so long that I did not recognize it when it drifted to me some months ago whilst walking amongst the woods. The treespirits have become leery of me when I bring paper out there as they fear that I will read to them once more even though I promised not to again and again.

Humans lie when they live is all they say to that.

Who is Sebastian Falke.

'He disappeared because no one understood. He spoke the language of dreams, the language ecstatic, of visuals, the way he painted and crafted each scene and moved the camera so effortlessly as if his eye was made of water and every action became fluid and dynamic. A master of editing and extended shots that lasted the length of the film, which is partly why he made short films. They didn't have reels that lasted long enough to do a feature in a single take, and I think that's what he was after, pushing the grammar and syntax of cinema beyond what anyone thought it could be. He learned from Hitchcock in that

regard but went further because he was more pure in terms of aesthetics. Hitchcock and every other filmmaker to ever push record on the camera hasn't understood that words have no place on camera. Asia has understood this or never forgot it because film was perfect when it began. Unbridled visuals unhampered by the muck and mire of vocal communication, by linguistics. The language of film has been intact since its inception, since still frames were first made, but when sound could be added, the world went for it because everyone always believes that more is more, forgetting the old adage that less is so. And that's what it comes down to. Sebastian Falke never bothered with dialogue. Rather, he focused on the language that does not lie. The language of bodies in motion and the language of the eye. He used audition but only for music and sound, never for words because words can never tell the truth or even half of it. Words are masks, a way to hide and cover what we mean. But, like I said, the Asian filmmakers, the Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans understand film better because, I think, it's not natural to them in that they didn't conceive of it but were given it. Of course, not all Asian film does this properly and never was there a man as daring as Sebastian Falke to forego completely the use of dialogue in a film, but that's why he matters and deserves memory. He deserved to be lonely. It's what killed him. We forgot

his life and work. There is nothing worse for an artist than the passage of time in silence.' Marcel's voice trailed off then and we were at the front door of my parents' where Terry and I stayed that week. It was the last day home. I felt fifteen again. We never touched the many hours we talked in the woods that week. Never did our skin meet the other's but I made another promise when we reached my door. I made a promise that if your note—I knew there would be one—said I love you then I would find you and maybe we would be happy. Finally.

You left the next day. 'Sebastian Falke may be dead, but his life is out there,' he turned to Miho, 'and we'll find it.'

The note simply said, I burn for you.



Over the following five years of your life we met only a few times and the last has already been told. Genevieve's birth brought Terry and me closer but every time you returned a wedge was shoved deeper between the two of us. A gulf that we hadn't the foresight to close. And you and I never found a reconciliation but only drifted further and further from one another. We were strangers that knew the other too intimately for our lives to ever

reunite as we both yearned. You left stains on my soul and if your words are to be believed then your very soul only persisted in order to see my smile. It's not the same when I write it. Nothing comes out proper or the way you meant it.

'Why don't you make a movie?'

Miho cracked a smile and you laughed, 'I'm not talented enough to make one.'

'You love the movies.' I stared at my hands and tugged at my hair because you made me a child perpetually.

'I belong to them. We both do.'

At first I thought you meant me but you looked at her. Miho. Helena coughed quietly and you put your hand on her thigh.

All these women for you and you only wanted the one who couldn't return all the love you carried inside. But you told me once that you refuse to settle for love and would rather die alone than settle for good enough. I think you wanted to die alone but Miho wouldn't let you. She saved you the way I never could even though you believed I would.



'There's no saving me,' you were nineteen and we were sharing the bottom of a bottle and the last cigarette. Another long night of depression but we were together at least.



'You should make a movie, though.' I looked at you and at the women with you. The restaurant was full and I felt underdressed beside Helena from France and Miho from Japan. I sat there only Virginia from nowhere in America who talked to trees. 'You spent your whole life searching for them. Do you remember what you told me?'

Your eyes flashed and you were with only me for a moment that Helena missed but Miho didn't because she was the one who truly loved. 'I remember everything with you.'

'You told me you were on a journey through time and across continents.'

'I remember.'

'What was it for?'

You leaned close to hide it from the others I think. Slack, gaunt, your eyes weighed by years you would never live but you appeared aged like you would never be. The words

never met soundwaves but you said it all the same by simply mouthing it and looking at me so, For you.

I didn't understand. Not until I read *The Death of the Sun* and *The Birth of the Moon* would it become clear. These two novels dealt closest with me though never was a word uttered that had anything to do with me or any conversation we had. But I was on every page and I know they were the ones that you meant most for me. In other works I destroyed but in this I created and brought you peace. But also they were about running and you spent your life escaping me who you believed was always only around the corner waiting for you.

I could have been.



I don't love you. I never did. Not the way you wanted.
Not the way you want.



Sebastian Falk gave Marcel hope and something to believe in that wasn't caught up in the wake of our

collective memories. There was no escape for him nor was there for me though I always did think that it didn't sweep me away the way it took him. I know now how much I lied and for how long. It's funny how important it seems while it happens and became so meaningless when I grew older. Those youthful days with him that meant everything became only the blissful schooldays that everyone grows nostalgic for but that loses its weight and intimacy. I saw it as simply youth acting as youth acts. Many years later when he was buried and all of his books read by me and millions of other did I understand how much those days meant. One day in particular when we were truly perfect.



Christmas is fast approaching. Marcel, my son, wanders the woods now that vacation has started. He dresses like him. Like Marcel. He found an old coat of George's and he refuses to wear anything else though it's threadbare and smells of attic. Never was he one for hats the way my son is. He wears fedoras at all hours that his grandfather gave him. Genevieve returned home and will spend Christmas day with me and Eve with her father.

My family together but it sometimes leaves me hollow. Genevieve grew so different than Terry and me but I blame that on the divorce. Marcel, though. We allowed him to be peculiar as a child and so he never grew out of it, I suppose. He plays with his camera all day taking pictures of everything he can find in the forest.

He spent the summer capturing images of dead animals. The trees told me because they worried for him.

Often times I do not know him. Neither his father nor me nor anyone else. Bold like the dead Marcel and fiercely himself.

My children one day stopped being mine and grew into you. I never meant it but a part of me has missed you my whole life and so I spent their lifetimes raising you from the earth.

You should have given Miho a child.

George always is more affectionate round the holidays so he paws at me more these nights. The opposite of a bear in that he hibernates all year until the snow falls.

I don't want to talk about George. He's a kind man. You'd like him.



I wait for the present from Miho. At times, especially the months I have spent writing you back to life, her gifts consume every single one of my thoughts for days. I wonder who she is and who she was before all of this. Before she met you and got pulled along by the memories you and I shared because I know we set this all in motion together that night we walked home covered in gasoline and I saved the forest from you and saved you from it.

She searches for him still. I know. Sebastian Falke. Without that first night I don't believe Sebastian Falke would ever have even existed. Not for you and not for me and not for Miho. If not for that first night maybe we would all have found happiness.

'Promise me you'll be happy.'

I tried.



George asked me this morning what this notebook is for. He read parts and I felt alone. Fifteen years of marriage and I would have assumed or known that he trusted me but maybe this is strange of me spending all night walking around writing about a man I never loved.

When I met George, Genevieve was already ten and I was getting old and cold. He saved me from myself and brought Genevieve back to me. He's a kind man with deep blue eyes that always do remind me of twilight during summer. Separate from the rest of the men in my life, he doesn't love me. Not the way Terry did or Marcel does. He's ten years my senior and his first wife died having their child who died along with her. It's hard for a mother to let go.

The lonesome blues. That's what I thought when I first met him and he turned those eyes in my direction.

We had Marcel a year later and were married soon after. Happy accidents.

I never told him but he must know now. Know about you.



I wonder if you will keep being an ending. If you will end George and me the way you ended me and Terry or the way we ended. You gave every beat of your heart to me but the last one was for Miho. That's what I believe.

You gave so much that parts of me started giving in return on accident. Genevieve all fiery and artistic with

that determination that you had to be perfect and that unbridled genius she carries between her shoulders. And Marcel not only in name but somehow in all the ways that matter. The power of a name.

Can a name make a person someone else? If I changed my name would these memories fade? If I forgot yours would you cease to be real?

Never has the guilt stopped and that may be why, I suppose.



All things fade is something that Marcel always talked about. Impermanence and futility. I go to his grave every year on his birthday still. In truth, I spend every year near.

Marcel never could do anything normal and he left Miho in charge of every aspect of his death and afterlife. No casket or tombstone. I don't know how she found it but I believe it's where we first met and on the very ground I lied on top of him for the only time when I believed he would kiss me and make our life what it should have been. Buried right beside the forest with a tree planted on top.

Impermanent but would remain as long as that tree lives. I didn't come home right away and wasn't at his funeral. Moved back in with mum and pap after the divorce with Genevieve by my side. Like me she spent the days amongst them but I never asked what she heard there but I believe she talked to them and they spoke back in that language of trees.

I hope she never hears them cry. Hope even more that she never has a reason to make them.

She's out there now smoking Red Puffins and leaning against him. It was always her favorite tree.

I didn't think so at first but it is why. Why I came back and why I have stayed.

He has a home to which he can return.

Genevieve and I walked there this morning. Christmas Eve. Snow boots and high steps and Red Puffins. Not many smoke them here and George doesn't know but Genevieve and me keep this one thing secret. We came to his tree.

'Do you know who planted this tree?'

Genevieve shook her head and exhaled loud the way she does when she smokes.

'The woman who sends me gifts every Christmas.'

She nodded not saying anything.

'Do you know why?'

'You guys are friends.'

I pointed to the base of his tree, 'A man is buried there.'

'Shut up.' She looked at me then and her face opened,
'Shut up.'

'He was my best friend. You met him.'

Her face returned to its original expression which is a mix of boredom and regret. For what, I don't know. 'Marcel,' her loud sucking inhale and louder exhale of smoke.

'Your father told you.'

'He didn't have to.'

'I didn't love him.'

She dropped her cigarette in the snow and smiled, 'You didn't have to.'

There were tears in my eyes and she hugged me not knowing if she understood what I tried to tell her and not even certain I told her anything but I lightened as if I carried round his carcass for all these years only to have my daughter cut the strings.

'I've done some things I want to forget,' I whispered over her shoulder.

'Keep writing.' And I don't know if it was her or the trees but I wept anew holding onto my daughter to keep me from falling through the earth to lie beside you.

We stayed out there with him and his tree for another Puffin and then walked through the trees. Silent in winter

the way they always are but Genevieve's eyes wandered and she craned her neck back and forth.

'What?'

She shook her head, 'It's nothing.'

I almost asked then but didn't. I will if we come out here again.



I woke this morning and went to the front door because that's where it is every year. I opened to find not a package or a letter as usual but to see Miho staring back at me somehow unaged from the last time I physically saw her over twenty years ago.

'I'm sorry to show up this way but I felt that this needed to be delivered in person.'

My mouth agape and me feeling embarrassed still in my pyjamas staring at Miho dressed so well and still looking twenty six and before I told her to come in I wondered for a bit if she had waited out there for me to open the door or if she had just gotten here and was about to knock.

I led her to the sitting room, 'Can I get you some tea or coffee? Sorry the house is such a mess.'

A slight smile pulled across her young face and she didn't speak but I knew what she said.

'Sure? It's not trouble. I'll set the pot on.'

The look on her face told me No and then it told me to sit with her and talk and I did even though I wanted to change and do my hair. There I was an old woman past fifty worrying what a stranger thought about how I looked at daybreak on Christmas day.

I sat in the chair beside her, 'I want to thank you for everything you sent me over the years. You have no idea how much it means to me.'

She smiled and lowered her head a bit which caused her black hair to fall over her face but she corrected it, 'It was no trouble. He wanted it this way.'

I felt hot and the air thickened somehow like the humidity rose here in the dead of winter. My voice faltered and maybe I was already crying, 'He planned everything, didn't he?'

She nodded but stopped smiling as if the mention of him from my lips was too much for her because, like me, she kept him close to her heart and secret the way only women can. She didn't say but I knew.

We knew one another though we never spoke till today. She from him and me from her book about him. And all

this time we never spoke about him and even now spoke in codes and whispers and never saying the words aloud.

She touched a hand to my knee and handed me an envelope that was too thin to be full of one of his letters. 'We found him.'

I took it in my hands and opened it to find a single piece of paper. The first thing I noticed was the name Sebastian Falke written in big letters and fancy script. I stared at it for a long while not even seeing it. 'What is this?'

'The end.'

I frowned and looked back at the paper seeing it now. An invitation to a screening. *Who Do You Run To?* a film by Sebastian Falke screening for the first time in more than half a century at Cannes.

I read it again and again trying to understand.

'He's real,' I said but didn't ask. My voice kind of falling out of me and then she hugged me and she smelt like the snow from a mountain in a country I never have heard of.

She hugged me till I hugged her back and I believe she cried but I don't know because I was too busy with my own tears to worry about another's.

'How,' my voice cracked and she separated only enough for us to be eye to eye with our noses almost touching.

She kissed me on the nose and then the forehead and stood up and was gone or at least that's how I remember it.

Since then a daze has been on me and it was hours before I did anything other than clutch the invitation addressed to me and my children.

Marcel shook me when he finally woke. No one else had noticed or had cared to understand but Marcel came and woke me.

'Mom, what are you doing?' His laughter high and musical.

I turned my eyes to him, 'We're going to France,' I heard myself say and handed him one of the four tickets that was in the envelope. We leave in May.



It's night now and sleep cannot find me because you finally did.

I hear your voice:

I say your name and pray it's true for all these days I think of you.

I died but returned for you.

Gina.

I love you.

Part Three

— hurt left by those who care leaves a hole that only
love fills—

The darkness filled every corner and then skin shown too close. A cutaneous canvas smooth and devoid of features flown over. The topography of flesh cast in bold chiaroscuro and a face. The eye, nothing but. Closed. Opened. The pupil wandered, searched. Widening, a face, the face of a man. Shorn scalp and fine eyebrows, the only hair visible. Deep caverns for eyes and their movement disappeared, obscured by the shades. His face bloomed in the halflight, then withered to a forehead, nose, and chin. Shadows long. There was no movement then. A face invisible but a body grew in view. Emaciated, ribs peeked through the darkness, all corners, sharp elbows and knees, a long body origamied.

Encased by a hole, the man sat and waited. For many minutes there was nothing but a cough and a readjusting of body parts, an attempt or three at comfort. Dirty and

hairless and nude, the hole shovelled into the earth. The man looked up, his face bathed in light for a moment. Gone. A hand over the skin of his bare head, the sound grated through the silence. And silence set. And movement stilled. The man's face dropped in and out of light and dark, a battlefield around him between the shadows and the filtered light. Their movement and appearance followed no logic and disintegrated naturalism. The shadows grew like teeth, like a mouth, and swallowed first his head and reached down over his shoulders, but the light took back the arms and the crossed legs, then it flipped. The face shown bright, the extremities obliterated. Thin lips and a straight narrow nose etched from skeletal features. High cheekbones and a pointed chin on either side of cavernous cheeks that no light penetrated. Movement, closing in, following his skin once more from his right knee to his stomach and round him up his spine, each vertebrae cracking skin, to his neck. round and round, and slowly up swirling cyclically about his head at an increasing pace until there was only flashed brightness and dizzying darkness, and then the hole above, so far above, so bright above, and spinning still, but it slowed and then stopped and traced the wall of dirt, the shovelhead's force, the mark of human hands, of fingernails, of despair.

Back to the man, the back of his head and downward to his back, the in and out of his breathing, the way his back expanded and contracted, and then shuddered violently and seized with a cough. He reached to scratch his back and the mechanisations of his physiognomy, sinew and bone so clear, scratching through the thin sheen of dissolving skin, so long since sunlight.

Twist and his jaw chewed on nothing, chewed on dreams, on memories, a tooth fell from between his lips and then another and blood followed, but a hand to understand did not. It rolled down his chin and he spit. His eyes stared far as the blind away through the dirt inches from his face.

Far away, at the top of the hole, perhaps, or in an adjacent hole, maybe, fingertips grazed piano keys, not in song, but in experimentation. Testing each sound, each key, drawing an audiographical map on his face. Each key punctured his expression, his deadeyes and absent chewing jaw raining teeth and rivers of blood.

The body's in the seats shifted uncomfortably and murmurs pierced the illusion of celluloid. Hundreds of humans staring together at a large screen in the southeast of France in late May. The film continued but the crowd's impatience loomed. Twenty minutes of film already passed and nothing but a dirty bald frail man sitting in a dirthole.

He did not move because there was no where to move, no room to do anything but sit, and so he sat, he coughed, he bled, his teeth fell, but nothing.

Riveted to his seat, his eyes never fading beneath the screen's glare, an octogenarian sits between three women. To his left is a young asian woman who sits beside a middle aged caucasian with dark hair and a face that held onto its beauty. To his right sits another middle aged white woman, not as pretty, rugged and unrefined. All three women cried, the tears streaking the face they wore to the premier. His eyes remained dry but the fist in his throat choked. His breathless glassy gaze swallowed each and every instant lived on screen. Every moment of the man in the hole and the unbroken eye of the camera lens.

The man there, on the screen, he stood and stretched. His penis dipped in and out of shadow revealing his jewish heritage. The war of shadow and light never ceased and violence escalated as the man's movement increased. A lightshow of absence and ablutions, of dissolution and absolution, carved into the skin by the chaos blaring from the piano, still far away or buried nearby, played as if by a child with wooden hands and glass eyes and metal ears. The camera connected to no time or geometrical boundaries moved as if tied to a serpent's head as it glided and spun, revolved and orbited, dived and soared.

Halfway through the film the unrest of the humans turned intolerable and the man in his seat was torn for an instant from the man in the screen when heads disrupted the illusion. Bodies standing and walking and leaving, grumbled whispers, hisses, outright single syllable condemnations broke the sound and the man in the seat in the cinema in the southeast of France late in May during a film festival lost the thread that had woven round him. He watched them go, nodded, a frown pushed his lower lip over his upper, and then attention cut out the humans in the theatre and returned to the man in the screen in the hole in the past.

For eighty seven minutes the film lasted. For eighty seven minutes the unbroken take lasted. For eighty seven minutes a man sat in a hole. When the credits rolled, the jeers struck, the boos, the hisses, the shouts of indignation, demanding why this lost film had not stayed lost. The three women beside the man still cried, whether from sorrow over the film or sorrow over the film's reception. The man returned to the world of the present when the humans erupted in anger and dismay. He looked around, nodded, frowned, pushing his lower lip over the upper, and pulled his hat low. He shook the hand of the young asian woman beside him, thanked her, his voice rattled,

tears that did not come rang in his vocal chords, but she did not hear over the humans.

He watched the postfilm interview with the asian woman, Miho Takitani. It lasted two minutes and one question: Who cares about Sebastian Falke?

I do, she said, and walked off stage to much booing, hissing, and jeering.



The man sat at the bar where no one spoke french but neither did they speak english. The jeers did not stop and the entire festival turned on the film that never should have been unburied. He drank two glasses of red wine and walked to the beach, wandering from encroaching violence. The sunset long past, the moon smiled, but not at him or for him. He steadied himself and slowly kicked off one shoe, then the other. He bent at the waist, reached out a hand to the shoes, gave up, and stood upright again, his breath shallow, his frown stuck to his face since the film ended. Loosening his tie, he walked to the shore. The sea danced over the sand and cooled his feet, a sigh dropped from his frown, eyes closed. The stars, numerous and luminous. One shined brighter than the others far

away at the spot where sea and sky greet and meet each night and day.

He stood there for minutes and then walked up and down the beach until midnight. A woman appeared beside him and his heart beat too hard when he noticed her watching him.

She did not say anything but stood so close he felt the sadness of her life. It was the woman from the theatre, the unpretty one. He glanced at her, then the stars, her, stars, her, stars, sand, sea, stars, her. She watched, not him, but the one star brighter than the others.

That's him, she said, I know it.

He looked at her and she looked back, his frown already in place. He averted his eyes but she did not, so he put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle.

He whistled the song to an old film that he composed the music for. Another lost film about a young girl who carries the souls of the dead to the ocean.

The woman began to whistle with him and he stopped, stared back at her, but she was lost to the stars once more, whistling a song he had written before she dreamt of being born, lost nearly as long. He studied her but there was no answer for him to the question he did not ask.

He sat down with great effort, rolled up his trouser legs, and let the waves take them.

Did you know him, she said when the whistling stopped.

He frowned and nodded but she was not looking at him so he said Yes.

She sat, put her arms around him, pressed her head to his shoulder. I miss him, she said. The tears crawled through the fabric of his suit and reached his aged skin. He put a palm to her cheek and patted it once.

She helped him stand and his breath was gone. They walked, him through the waves, smiling, her on the beach, behind, crying, watching that one star.



In his room he sat on his bed and tried to slow his breathing and heart. Unbuttoning his shirt, removing his tie, his stomach sagged over his belt and he left his shoes on the beach. He drank a glass of water and then another and then another, gasping, splashed some more on his face and ran a hand through the remainder of his hair and over the crags of his face. A desk provided, he sat, pulled open the drawer to find post-it notes.

He looked around for a pen and saw it next to the bed. He frowned, his lower lip over his upper, and pushed him-

self up from the chair, his arms shaking. The pen retrieved, he pulled out the stack of post-it notes, his hands shaking, but not from apprehension or exertion.

I saw you today. For so long you've been lost. They reacted the same today as fifty years ago. Was it ever so bad? Sebastian's found a rare ability to offend and insult prestigious audiences even after so long dead. I miss you. Have missed you so long.

He peeled it from the stack and placed it on the wall before him and read it over and over for five minutes, his hands supporting his head.

The clock read 4:19.

He lied down in bed but did not sleep until 5:41. He stared at the ceiling, at the walls, he cried for thirty eight minutes, rasped sobs that wrecked his chest and left him weak and frail beyond his too many years. He said two syllables aloud: Alec.

When he fell asleep his pillow was still warm and wet from his tears, the ones he saved and carried inside since before anyone in that theatre with him had yet been born.

He slept fitfully. Jostling with the sheets and wrapped up by them till his legs no longer kicked, body no longer turned, new tears, awake in cold sweat and pang burning in his chest, his neck, the back of his head. Sitting up, he put

his face in his hands, the moisture and salt of tears caught in the folds, the crevasses of hanging skin.

6:47, he left bed and dressed lightly. By 7:07 he stood with his feet in the sand again. Missed sunset but the sun still young clung low to the sea and reflected there, a brilliant photonic bridge that lead back centuries to where he lived a different life in a different world before film or death that lasted a lifetime. The moon still shown but smiled with translucence and retreated long before the fires smoldered. The beach not empty but with only a few.

He did not look at the other humans but held onto the shine in the sea until a young asian woman stood beside him. Miho Takitani.

Thank you so much for coming, she said, breaking him from his millennial stare. His eyes widened then narrowed and he frowned, raising one hand to block the sun to see her. Smooth skin and straight black hair.

It means so much to me that you came.

He nodded, the frown hiding his upper lip. She put a hand to his arm, squeezed, and he watched, his face betraying bemusement, then back to her face, tears in her blackeyes, a sorrowful porcelain. He placed his hand on hers, patted once, and both withdrew. He deeper to the beach, feet brushed by waves, she to take her first step in thirty years towards a future she denied, but the deed

finished, she was left with only the option to follow a man long dead or begin anew for him.

The octogenarian did not watch her go or know they parted at a crossroads that would define however many hours or years were left to her. He stood in the waves and listened. Echoes carried by the water brought sound across time and space. He shuddered, sweat covered him, a hand to his face, dizzy, eyes from meat to glass, a shattering sigh.



Dust in stasis but growing, accumulating, always becoming more, nothing else. Beams of light peered through blinds and particles wandered the air like phantoms lost in a void looking for what they no longer remembered or smelt or tasted but only felt. Silence inside. The walls bare, the furniture sparse, the windows large but blind, a studio apartment with a kitchen, dirty, though never used. From the window rolled the waves from nowhere near France. Continents divided.

The jingle of metal rolled on metal, of metal tapping metal, of grooves locking into grooves, and mechanisms turning. The door opened and air rushed out and air rushed in. Dust blown and sucked, a cyclone invisible to

all but the light. He struggled with the keys stuck in the lock and pushed the door behind him but it did not close but he did not push it shut. He set his suitcase on his single bed and took out both suits, hung them in the closet, and returned the ties to their vacant places. The undershirts and underwear tossed into the hamper. Closing the suitcase with a sigh, he lowered, slow, and pushed it under his bed, arms a quiver, back groaning, and pushed back to a stand. He sat from exhaustion, from 5,000 miles, from twelve hours, and he left the fires of southeast France for the fires of home.

6:29 became 8:48 before he moved, the growl in his stomach, the push of prostate on bladder, and he walked unbalanced to the toilet. Holding the bar installed beside the toilet, he took aim and dropped a stream that sputtered from him, his breath heavy and audible. His face reflected before him, he did not meet his eyes, which were not blue and were not green and were not grey but some color where all of these met, shook hands, and exchanged histories.

The dying light turned the beach ghastly. Sharp rocks and hazardous teenagedom beyond where he stood watching the sun fall into the ocean. The ocean where the past meets the present to watch the future crumble. The ocean carries memories and death and they wander

as vagabond reminisces in search of what they lost on the otherside of the great divide.

He watched the fires start and the laughter echo into the echoes of all the new ghosts and new dead stumbling over the sand and rocks of this coast. He looked south to LA, a land of stars on earth to replace all the ones blotted out in the firmament. He did not see LA or the fires that began there, the inferno that turned fame to forgotten, actors to ash, directors to dust, and smut to soot. He did not see beyond the bend of the coast but more ocean, the ocean that ran south to different shores carrying different deaths to different echoes to different silent shouts.

Shuffling in sand, each step a meditation, he watched his feet mingle with the sand. In the deadlight they were the same and he watched his body crumble into the dust as he sought the ocean with outstretched hands and dry lungs and empty cries.



4 :57 and he gave up on sleep after hours of shifting, readjusting, watching the inside of eyelids, the blank stares of walls. The walls breathed, the pipes beyond seethed, and all was still and silent but for the rustling of

sheets and his tepid heartbeat. Four times he clutched his heart. Four minutes he fought tears. Fifty one minutes he gave into them and let the pain run from his eyes to stain the sheets. He whispered no names but his lips moved incessantly, a prayer, perhaps, or a memory.

He showered from 6:11 until 6:42, the steam blinding, the heat scourging, the pain pleasant, the lines of his face longer, the sag heavier, the eyes barely open, the breath came in fragments, the heartbeats in intervals.

im here

Written in the mirror but he did not see. Drying himself, he exited the bathroom and sat on his bed. A smell. The smell of a man, of oceanfires and futurerain. He shuddered, his spine threatened to collapse, to splinter, racked by sobs that assaulted his frailty. Eighty six years gone, his eighty seventh so full of tears. Not since fifty nine years before.

He remained so for one hour and twenty eight minutes, sometimes staring into his hands, sometimes out the window, rolling in bed, shifting, the tears crawling from his eyes and rivering in all directions from the many canyons of his visage.



The day progressed from the light running through his window. It covered his body in bed and reached the four walls of the apartment, the hunger pangs stronger, battling the gnawing pain only tears can cure, but he shivered, not from cold. Wiping his face, he dressed: slacks, grey shirt, white, tie, red, double Windsor, cufflinks, obsidian, sportscoat, camel. A fedora on his head, he exited the apartment.

Salmon salad, water, then tea, chamomile. He tipped generously, tipped his hat to the staff who knew his name, who asked him about Cannes, who he hid what lied deep behind the irises of his eyes, smiles, come back soon, thank you, and the jingle of the door opening and closing. The sun shaded by wisped clouds but bright somehow, he walked, directionless, habitual, up and down streets, a silent cry inside him bursting with the creak of each joint, the heat on his neck and lower back. He took out his kerchief, wiped his forehead, then neck, his breathing heavy from the incline of streets.

On a hill overlooking a different beach, a fog descended, shrouding the meaning of waves and the call of celestial bodies unseen. The wind blew against his face drying the sweat and tears. He bellowed in the midst of mist. He screamed until his throat turned to glass and shattered in the wind swirling about him. He did not scream a name or

a face or any word in any language he knew. He screamed and the lines of his face dug deeper, the canyons wider, the bags of his eyes heavier. His blood ran thin, his wheeze audible, his eardrums popped, the world in low register.

He walked back down from where he stood and passed concerned faces, confused faces, faces of only those two types, and he smiled.



The sounds of Henryk Górecki's Third Symphony turned too loud filled the space of his apartment and burst through the walls but no neighbors came to his door demanding silence. He cleaned the dust from his apartment, a constant battle without victories or beginnings or endings. The dust came from nowhere, from everywhere, and he collected it in bins, a sweep at a time. These days it left him weary and dizzy but even so the battle, not raged, but insisted. He wiped the counters, the mantle of a fake fireplace, the back of the toilet. He scrubbed the sinks, the toilet, the floors, the walls, washed his sheets, his blanket, his towels. He cleaned until the Symphony ran four rotations and sweat dripped from his

nose, the wind blowing through the open windows gave no relief but removed the acrid stench of cleaning solvents.

The one smell remained and it was not his own. Not the stench of decayed flesh, rotting organs, or accidental urination, but of fires beside the ocean under a luminous night sky and sex in the rain.

He stopped the record and opened a book that a man long dead gave him. He turned to a page more worn than the others.

Where were you then? Who else was there? Saying what? Why will the whole of love come on me suddenly—when I am sad and feel you are far away?

He placed it down and sat.

And waited.

He spoke then in whispers he did not hear.

Understand, I'll slip quietly away from the noisy crowd—when I see the pale stars rising, blooming, over the oaks. I'll pursue solitary pathways through the pale twilight meadows, with only this one dream: You come too.

His lips danced in despair and a dam broke flooding the silence with sobs.



He showered once more but did not wash. He sat in the tub and let the water fall on his feet and run past him to the drain. He watched the flow of water from below and the steam took the room. He did not object or raise a hand, a battle did not ensue, for he opened the gates to this.

He tried to pull himself up from the tub but could not so he waited.

Many minutes passed and he spent most of them staring through the porcelain just beyond his penis. Clean but for the tears and all the many years he held them. His skin pruned, the wrinkles like roadmaps travelling over his body.

He grabbed the railing on the wall with his right hand, put his left to the base of the tub, breathed deep in and out twice, and timed his push with his pull, got his legs under him, and the hot water of the shower scoured his tender skin, nearly toppling him. He turned it off without more trouble.

i remember me

i remember you

Written in the mirror but the cloud of steam obscured and he did not see, walking as if blind, the fog from outside invaded. Opening the bathroom door, the steam rushed out but singlefile, taking its time.



The television told him about a riot in Cannes over a film called *Who Do You Run To?*. The festival burnt down and the offending film turned to ashes as, the official asserted, it should have remained. They went on to discuss the life of Sebastian Falke and he watched pictures from a lifetime ago, his own life, lost for all to see. Him and Sebastian, him and Alec, all three, Genevieve, too. He did not turn it off, but he walked about the apartment checking counters and tables and sills for dust that was already piled high. He closed the window to silence the howling wind that smelt of smoke, the fire approaching, and to keep the dust and soot from invading.

He cleaned the apartment again until he sweated and the programme turned from Sebastian Falke and his own life to a young man long dead named Marcel Maddox and his quest for Sebastian that led to his biographer, Miho Takitani, to the discovery of the lost and only feature length film of Falke's hidden and unknown career.

Years spent in search only to watch it burn within days.
A life measured by soot.

The man paid little attention as the dust waged war with him for supremacy of his habitat. He scrubbed till his wrists hurt, till his back ached, till arthritis immobilised him and he sat on his bed breathing deep through his nose with eyes closed. The television chattered on about Sebastian Falke and Marcel Maddox and all the people they knew, all the artists and vagabonds, and then onto other figures lost to obscurity or the aseptic discourse of the avant gardists.

He wiped his brow and stared at the remote controlling the television across the apartment. For one minute he stared, his chest rising and falling, slowing, but he did not stand up. He lied down, turned from the television and out his window at the fog close at hand and the smoke closer than yesterday. The television spoke of fires spread over the west coast and others in Chile and France and Thailand.

The hours melted together and it was not until 3:19 that he fell asleep, the last conscious words were those of a man selling knives to a supermodel, his brain falling through his pillow and floor into a place where dreams birth reality.

At 6:01 he shouted himself awake to see the sunrise and the fires reach the shore. Sweat covered him and he looked around, his face covered in disbelief. Trembling lips, sinking ships, a name against them, a thousand names

for the morning news. Rubbing his eyes, he shook the name away and watched the ship fall through the horizon, taking young men and women to their death.



I have a dust problem, he said.

'Hm?' a blank stare and a ten dollar haircut, 'Dust?'
Yes, I can't get rid of the dust.

The young man leaned back, crossed his arms, 'Dust?'

Yes, dust. Lots of dust. More dust than can be accounted for.

'How old are you?'

He walked away, shuffled away, a way through crowds and faces of humans racked with guilt, with fear, the acrid stench of the millennial fires assaulting nostrils. Pushing, shoving, the jostle of a crowd in market, summer heat and winds, but unnatural, contorted and distorted by cataclysm and catastrophe.

A nursery, plants, humidity higher inside and the stench of smoking life exchanged for fecundity. He wandered about for fifty three minutes, touching a plant here, opening a door there, a maze that ever expanded the more his slow gait carried his absentminded shuffle through mil-

lions of species only the few had names for beyond flower, bush, tree.

'Can I help you?' A darkskinned woman with blonde hair, unnatural, cropped close to the scalp, stared at him, rubbing her hands clean on the apron, blue, she wore.

I have a dust problem.

'Dust,' she nodded. 'Follow me.'

He did, for eleven minutes and over two hundred paces, down stairs, through a door, left at a hallway, right at another, up stairs, another hallway, another door, and more stairs, up. He did not speak, nor did she. They walked in silence, his hand ruffling the leaves of certain plants and avoiding others. His eyes wandered halfseeing, half-dreaming, never resting upon anything, until the woman interrupted his ambulatory absence.

She stood before him holding a small pot with a small flower, purple like the evenstars, 'This is what you're looking for.'

This will solve the dust problem?

'This plant takes in many things, dust, memories, regrets, dreams, and purifies them.'

He frowned, his upper lip disappearing. I only need the dust, he said.

She smiled as if she knew a secret, her eyes narrow, her head cocked, coy, 'You want to forget.'

His brow furrowed. He stared at the plant for a moment, then the woman, the plant, the woman.

'You're afraid.'

I do not want to forget.

'You do.'

He closed his eyes to hold back the torrent. He opened his mouth but nothing audible fell out, only the impressions left in the air of a name.

He took the plant from her and found himself back in the crowd, carrying the plant like an infant, close to his chest, his eyes nowhere beyond its small petals. The crowd was thick, elbows to elbows, shoulders prying bodies apart, arms shimmied, feet scurrying for earth. A cloud overhead, black but not smelling of rain, a young man bumped and knocked the plant from the old man's hands, and he watched it spill to the earth, the soil mixing with the dirt and dust and feet. A young girl with ravenhair and eyes the color of its violet petals took the flower in her hands, cupped it, enough soil for it to stand, to live, she breathed onto it, the smell of rain grafted into his nostrils, expelling the effluvium of bodies and embers, and it was in his hands and the crowd was behind him, the fire off to the east and north and west and north.



He placed it in a small bowl that held sugar just moments before. Sprinkling with water, he set it on the coffeetable in the center of the room. For many minutes he stared at it, then he inspected the dust that piled on his counters, his floor, his mantle. The dust crept in through the walls but not the soot of the fireclouds. He pushed the table near the windows to give it sunlight. He watched it holding his breath and not blinking as if it held a great secret that it wanted to share with him. No secret appeared, perhaps.



He pulled out a clean notebook and opened it to its first page. The white stared back at him and so he stared harder, his brow knit, his upper lip swallowed by his lower, his eyes narrowed. He turned to the plant hidden in nightshade, past it to the hills far away on fire, and back to the blank page.

A pen in hand, he touched its point to begin. For one minute it remained there, his body frozen, and then, three deep breaths through his nose, he began.

I said your name the other day for the first time in decades. The first time this millennium. I watched a film the other day. Our film. Mine, yours, and Sebastian's. Do you remember? Sebastian and I spent two years writing a film without words.

His handwriting cramped, cursive and neat, without breaks. He shook his hand to make it stop shaking, perhaps.

It's because of that woman and that man. They came here so long ago that I had forgotten. He had wild eyes and talked too much. She never spoke. She was like a statue. I saw her at the film and she's the same. In these thirty years, time never touched her the way it's ravaged me. You wouldn't recognise me. Like her, you're forever young. I cried. I keep crying. Even now, the tears well. It's been so long. Since you died the first time, I have not cried. I looked for you even after. You would not believe the things I did. Time took you too soon. I want you to know right now that I have missed singing with you. Singing silence. Our fingers tied, our mouths one, a music only you wrote. I loved you like I have never loved. I had forgotten. I forgot so many things but the film, our film, now there

is only your absence. I am broken. I am old, the trousers yet unrolled, but I no longer sing or listen to the silence. The silence we created with Sebastian, that singularity that came from you and him and me. Do you remember me? Do you remember the poem you wrote? I found it in a book once many years later, many years after I forgot. It was not my book, and it did not make me laugh this time, but I did not cry then. It was not until recently, till I watched your ghosts naked in that hole that my body learnt to cry, to die one water molecule at a time. Do you remember what you said on the last day? You held my hand or I held yours, your body so frail, eyes so full, so big, too big. I kissed you but you told me you couldn't feel anything so I kissed you again and again even after you stopped breathing just in case you'd kiss me back, just in case all those stories we read on the coast of Dalkey were true, our bodies intertwined despite the threats of violence. I remember the Irish winds that brought you to me when we were still young enough to not know better, to not even know the name for the action we were caught in. Do you remember when Sebastian approached you? I thought he wanted you, wanted to take you from me. Even then, even when the jealousy came, I never thought of love as forbidden but that's why we left your home, wasn't it? Your mother let us share a room until she understood and

kicked us out and your father never spoke to you again. I apologised then but you brushed it away, so I want to apologise now, for taking you from home and watching you die as the only one close enough to be family, though, even everywhere, it was still forbidden. That's why I think I thought then that a kiss could take you back. Instead it was the dream of a deadman and his biographer who returned your ghost from the grave to stain my sheets with the tears I bled away in your hospital bed, the kidney I lost, the lung I offered, the blood I gave, the marrow I demanded they take until they strapped me down only to release me a month later, your body already underground. I wish I could say that I returned to you every year, but half a century and three lifetimes have gone by. When you live too long as I have done, you imagine the ghosts of your teens and twenties have died and been reborn again. It is not so.

His face in his hands, he turned his head to the flower watching him.

I smell you on my hands and hear your voice when I lie in bed. I no longer sleep. I no longer breathe. My heart stopped beating. Yet, still, I live. I live, but you remind me of all the years I spent with cords around my neck, carrying a gun in my pocket in case I drank enough to give myself courage to follow. I always played at Orpheus but I couldn't. I couldn't. I wanted to. I wonder if you

waited for me. If you still wait. I didn't. I want you to know that. I stopped waiting. But, today, I wonder if it's true. If all these years, these decades even happened, or if all my life's been a dream that I can't escape from. You told me a story once about a man who talked in his sleep who was trapped in his sleep by a lover, jealous. You said that if you talk to a person who talks in their sleep then they won't wake up but just keep on dreaming. What if I smell you now because you're still beside me? All these lives I've lived have been hallucinated behind my eyelids and we're still twenty three, in bed, fighting hunger and the cold, trying to make it last forever, not just us, but the films that no one remembers.

The pen dropped. He rubbed his wrist, his teeth chattered, but his eyes dry. He turned to the window, the pyre burning, the ash rising, the clock, 2:56.

I think we caused the world to catch fire.

He let the pen go again and stepped away from the notebook but did not close it. He turned off the light and stood in the darkness, his eyes closed. He sat, then lied on the floor, stretching his enfeebled body in all directions. The joints cracked, pain coursed, lungs seized, heart fluttered, and vision blurred into ecstatic white despite the fullness of night. His mouth open wide, eyes rolled back, fingers

tapping, toes reaching, he pulled himself from the edges and corners of his frame back to its center, and smiled.



The taste of sawdust and acid in his mouth that he opened and closed, running his tongue over the contours of his teeth, smacking his desertlips. Still on the floor, the sunlight crawling up his chest, 11:11 said the clock. A night of sleep, longer than days. A dampness, at his middle, he disrobed, tossed his pants, shirt, and trousers into the washing machine. He smiled when he pushed the button, walking in the nude, the sky cascading through his window, the black cloud blowing out over the ocean, the fires closer than the night previous, no ships or boats on the water.

The steam filled the bathroom and he let the water burn the dead and old skin from his decaying life. He whistled, a song he wrote sixty seven years before at a piano now buried underground.

In the sound of water hitting porcelain was a voice without a body, the voice of a memory. It weaved into the song he whistled, the sparse notes and the humming melody.

He dried himself, holding onto the rail to keep himself balanced. Dizzy, the steam mist blinding him. The mirror reflected nothing nor did it hold any words. He yawned and dressed. The plant he acquired the day previous grew and emanated a cold but faint violet light. His eyes narrowed, a hand over the remains of his hair, and the beard he was ignoring since returning home. He whispered to it two syllables, Alec, and then closed his eyes for a moment, the light brighter when he opened them.

The counters, sills, and mantles were dustless, as was the floor and the sunbeams that showed the galactic ellipse of dust particles adrift in the space. He turned back to the plant and smiled, put a finger to its petals, warm, burning like ice, caustic. Withdrawing, his right eyebrow twitched, and his face wore abhorrence.

He shuffled to the other edge of the apartment and heard the battering of wind on the building. The windowed door that led to the balcony shuddered and he opened it, the outside sucked in and the inside blown chaotically. The wind in his hair on the balcony, his eyes barely opened against the assault, embers danced through the air, trees catching light while men doused the flying flames.

Hey Mister, they said, but he did not respond or even acknowledge the rest of their speech broken by the torren-

tial wind. The sound stolen, a silence behind impenetrable white noise that deafened him, taking more and more frequencies from his auditory spectrum. Spreading his arms, the wind threatening to push him to the ground or over the railing, he braced himself and stared out to the ocean. No more humans on the beach or ships on the water, the sky filling with thousands of fireflies drifting and flickering across the atmosphere, born from the fires that run north from Santiago and south from Vancouver and west from Cannes.



The notebook lied open on the table yet the pages blew past where he left his words, his letter to the dead. His faltering steps returned him to the seat, which he dropped heavily into. Paging back he reread the words that slipped from his hand and brain to be left stained there before him, to exist so long as the fire did not reach them.

Then, after the end, four words he did not write.

we will meet again

He read it once, four times, ten times. He read it until the words no longer were semantic signifiers but only sounds drowned in his mouth clattering against the teeth

loosening in his jaws and reaching the eyes that dissolved like sugar in water before the letters, all fifteen of them glaring up at his face. Mouth open to speak but no words came or went, only the inaudible movements of a newborn, his mouth dry but spit dribbling from his cracked lips.

A finger to the letters. Not in cursive but printed, the hand all different, lefthanded, even, the way the letters slanted opposite. The letters were cold and the page was cold and the room cooled and the hairs rose on his arms, his neck. Clutching his heart, he closed his eyes and breathed through his nose until the world stabilised, no longer expanding, contracting, shifting without him, leaving him sealegged and lost.

Is it you?

He backed away from the paper, standing, watching, waiting. He stood there for four minutes, not breathing, not blinking. He turned to the plant, his face full of pleas and begs, long, the skin looser, the eyes deeper. He took the pen in his hand again but did not sit.

If it's you tell me you have to tell me Is it you Is it you Is it you

The pen clattered on the table, he picked it up, poised, dropped it again, pushed the notebook into the wall, his mouth agape.



He did not sleep that night but watched the fire burn without and the petals shine within. The pale purple fluoresce of fauna. He peered from the blanket wrapped around his body, turbaned round his head, his eyes wide, catching the ardor particled by the plant, exchanged for the dust. Reaching a hand out, warmth. Both hands, incandesced, drawing from his hands, from his veins, from his heart, brighter, hallowed, harrowed, his eyes luminous, two pale lanterns trading life for light.



The sun rose and dimmed the plant's blush. He rose, his body light, and he walked with ease to the other side of his apartment. Opening the refrigerator, nothing. Closed, he yawned and stretched, the arthritic joints pliable, uncreaked, uncracked.

The notebook remained on the desk and he walked slowly to it. With each step, his gait aged until he shuffled, bentbacked, pawing for stability in the air. Clutching the

chair, then the table, then his heart, he put on his glasses and pulled the notebook close.

every word brings me more
write me back to life
and so shall i

Breath shallow, heart racing, he took the pen in hand, shaking, vision blurred, a vibration starting in his center, above his stomach and bellow his heart, a vibration increasing until every molecule took up, spreading from his center to his organs to his limbs and head. He turned to the plant, bigger than before, than moments ago, brighter. He put the pen to paper beginning, not beginning, his hand faltered, the pen dropped, picked up, wiped brow, frowned, lower over upper, eyes narrowed, steady, began again, stopped, and so it was for seventeen minutes, the sunlight lengthening the shadows and touching the corners of his apartment.

It's you really you. I've prayed a name and repeated it within my breath over and over when the world begins to slur from me and I lose myself I say your name Alec Alec Alec to steady the world to bring it back into focus and I can walk and live again living off only your name I pray it's true for all these nights I can't not think of you.

A gasp and he stopped as if pulled back from the land of graves and memories. He looked around the room, watched the sunlight travel and fill space.

You're here. I smell you even now. Watching me. I feel your hands on my shoulder, your lips on my neck, and this could all be seventy years ago, couldn't it? I took a train that lasted all my life only to be brought back to you. That's how it feels, like my whole life without you has passed in flashes and instants only to find you, still so young, ageless. Where have you been and where did you come from? If writing brings you back then I will write until my hands bleed, until my eyes rot, and my tongue turns to ash from this millennial pyre. Do you remember? I remember all of it. The cigarettes you smoked, Red Puffins, always alight in your hand. I sometimes thought halfasleep that you were a demon breathing smoke and not the man I lay beside, that some deranged spirit possessed you, but then you looked at me with those small dark eyes, your pale Dublin skin, your hairless body, so unirish I called you an Israelite. Do you remember Munich? Salzburg? I loved you first at Neuschwanstein, you posing so that it looked like you ate the castle for my camera. Your whispered kisses deep in the Alps, not caring. I envied you for that, carelessness I never could have. Even still, you'd laugh at me and my worries. Age has changed many things but not the worries,

the anxieties. I have a child. She does not speak to me and I do not know where she is or if she still lives. The fires are everywhere, I think. I cannot watch the news and the television stopped making sense decades ago. You've missed nothing since your death except Sebastian's re-emergence, just as unwelcome as his initial plunge. People wanted to talk to me about the things we did but not anymore. I threw out the phone before I left for Cannes. I think the millennial fires keep the world busy now. I don't think it was us but it could have been. Our film brought ruin. The world would do better to have never had it return. Sometimes the dead should

He stopped, pressed his thumb and index finger to the bridge of his nose. The plant waved as if pushed and pulled by a breeze. The old man stared at its dance and felt the vibration again, his body warming then turning cold, exhaling long, until all air was gone, clutching his heart. Inhaling through his nose brought him back to full height, straightbacked in his chair.

He turned to the notebook, his back ached, fingers creaked, body hung, aged. He took the pen in his hand.

I want you back. To return. Life without you is no life. The many years have slipped from me and my regrets have worn caverns in my face as deep as a fist, the wrinkles like canyons. I age without you and I regret not going with, not

following you. The Thisbe to your Pyramus, your Juliet. One thing I discovered without you is that imitation does not work. I could never bring you back that way and now after all this time you have found me and not I you.

He stopped and wrote no more.

Turning on the shower, the steam filling space, a fog he disappeared in, his limbs and body no longer visible. He reached out his hand as if cupping a face but found nothing. And then hands on him, stretched from behind, they ran over his stomach, the sagging skin, the bulbous weight. He tried to move them away but found only the mist of condensation. A hand led him to the water, grazing his hand on all sides as if holding it, pulling him towards the fount. The water burned and his skin reddened and scorched, ripping away the flesh of age to birth a newness, a youth buried deep beneath his years, beneath mountains of time to be mined through for the man that once inhabited the old man's body. Hands all over him, evanescent hands of nonexistent touches, like a million wings of butterflies brushing, caressing every inch of his skin. The hands took his neck and a whisper told him to close his eyes but he did not and so watched the impressions of a vague visage form in the haze and approach. He took the face in his hands, the flesh of meat and the flesh of memories, he spoke a name, only two syllables, and lips met lips for

an instant and the room collapsed, emptied of steam, and he stared at his hands, at the vacant room where he stood beneath the boiling water, alone.



The sulphuric air stung his eyes and nostrils but he shuffled along carrying a petal from his plant. It burned like an ember in his hand but he carried it, his skin charring and smoldering. The crowds no longer were but the fires continued from their unquenchable source. The hills all around burned and a haze spread over the air, ash like first snows, the sun distorted by the holocaust, a pinkish oval far away over the sea turned white. He brushed the soot and ash from his hair and face but then stopped and let it pile on him. Other figures appeared through the blizzard but they did not see him or did not look. Everyone he saw shrouded in the dense haze of particles in flux, not falling or rising but drifting along, careless and ignorant of gravity. Each shuffled step brought more to the air and every foot he progressed stuck more of it to him. His mouth covered by his handkerchief, the petal on fire in his other palm, he wandered like the blind through the dismal landscape of millennial California.

Shouts and screams and the unmistakable noxious stench of flesh burning mixed in the air and mystified the encompassing cloud breathing smoke and spitting ash. The fires turned to stars galaxies away and nothing was seen but the edge of his nose and the flame in his hand turning his skin to cinder and ash.

The cemetery gates appeared a foot before him, poking through, visible. The gates, rent and broken, he walked past. His steps carried him and seventy minutes of aimless ambling brought him before a small stone that read Alec Flynn. Tears streamed from his face but not from sorrow. The ash and sulphur and smoke wore through him and he collapsed only to place the petal on the stone. Freed from his hand, the plant swallowed the haze around it, shining more and more. It spread, tendrils sprouted and searched for earth, burrowing into the soil round the stone, swallowing the smoke and ash, the cloud less thick near the bright evenstar he carried so far in his hands. It grew more and more, blooming flowers that wilted and fell to the earth as quickly as they sprouted. After the fifth such birth, life, and death, he plucked the new flower from its base, hot like ice in his hands, he took it with him and walked back home, alone, but found, his steps lighter, his back straighter, his breath breathed.

i have searched for you

for so long
born dead in this haze
i searched
forever
for no time at all
time is different
it neither is nor isnt
the dead
i only realised now
recently
that we were all dead
that we were all lost
but i found you
you called me
without knowing and without thinking
my name on your lips
a pen in your hand
you brought me back
to feel your touch and hear your voice
i know not where or why or how long
until now i was naught but emotion
i remember now
i remember
i remember all of you
The tears flowed and he read it over and over.

I remember all of you. He breathed it over and over, let it pass his teeth, roll against his tongue, in order to make it true, to make it last.

I will learn. I will learn to speak the forgotten language of the dead. We will speak. You will hold me and you will be my shadow, your ghost arms clung to me, I will live with you here, forever by my side. I will sew my skin to your spirit so we needn't be alone again. I remember how the wind would blow with rain and you held me close through those frigid Irish winters, though they chattered so and kicked us out of rooms and threw rocks when you loved me near the beach, not caring, never caring. Those were our times and I want them back, to return to a century ago, to a beautiful millennium lost to the passage of time. This new century, this newly birthed millennium already burns down and collapses all around. It will not last. I will see that day when you bury me and I reach from the grave to lie with you for the eternal sleep I owe you. We shall rest then.

He stopped and breathed for the first time since sitting. Old, his body anguished and worn, the soot and ash in his lungs, he turned to the flower, so bright, then the window, an impenetrable barrier of white smoke, of black smoke, the ash snowing against the walls, the soot piling with it and clinging to window sills.

He coughed and coughed till the blackness sputtered from his mouth and into his hand. His steps feeble and unsure, he made his way to the plant and bathed in its glow, but coughed anyway. He took the burning cold flower he stole from his grave and swallowed it whole.

The coughing subsided and the icy fire swept through his bones and sinews, recalibrating and reconfiguring the atoms, gutting the age from him, the inside out. He fell to the ground, seismic waves took him and the vibration returned, his eyes rolled back, his tongue shuddered, teeth clattered, and his body convulsed.



Awake on the floor, a puddle of black vomit stuck to his cheek, his pants damp and reeking of urine. He wiped his face and looked around the room and stopped at the flower, now in full bloom, shining its light onto him. He sat up, the clock, 3:19, and all was dark, night or day did not matter, the deep cloud billowed against the windows. Pushing himself to his feet, no bones creaked and no pain brought him gasping. Removing his clothes, he stood nude, his body the same, aged, but he wiggled his arms, loose, rolled his neck, lifted his knees, and reached

toward the ground. He did not reach his toes but his knees were well met. He smiled and laughed.

He showered but did not fill the room with steam nor did he take his time but rushed through and shaved, urinated and defecated. He cleaned the vomit and urine, dressed well, as if going to meet the day but paused before the balcony door. Turned to the plant, its light spotlighting his movements, hand on the handle, he removed it and walked to the flower. It smelt like the opposite of the ocean. Not a fount of the dead or a burial ground for memories, but flourishes of life, pungently fecund, but sweet, a promise of birth, not death. It smelt like eternal summer, the sweat of a lover. It smelt like him. Alec. His smile faded and he turned from the flower to the notebook and bound to it, his body growing weak with each step, bones creaking, back bending, neck stiffening.

He stood at the table breathing hard, vision faded, the hair on edge. Loosening his tie, undoing the buttons, he sat and closed his eyes and breathed three times deep through his nose.

youre dying i fear
and youll be gone from here
lost
it does not work as you say
to die is to lose

to be lost
you will ride the wind
follow scents of memories that are not yours
feel emotions
not your own
feel them so deep
it hurts to not be alive
you may grow jealous
become a tormentor
rabid
guilty
hateful
despising the living for their life
i remember
with each word you write
i remember
the me that was me
with you
sebastian
i remember
tell me of you
who are you now
what have you been
you almost died
i watched from here

watched the life seep out of you
you're losing you
but it tied you down
with a promise
to forget
tell me

He read it again and again, mouth held by his hand, heart in the other. He took the pen in his hand but did not write. Beside the window he searched through the fog of smoke. The silence weighed heavy. The walls no longer breathed, the pipes no longer spoke. The shouts from without disappeared. Alone. The fires invisible, the millennium encased by phantoms. No sunlight. No moonlight. No light but the evenstar brilliant in his own room and its daughter digesting within him.

Each step to the flower brought youth and each step to the notebook dug his grave. He stood between, where boundary met boundary, the draw of the past and the promise of future. For twenty three minutes he stood, inert, the tug of war coursing through him, weaving into the fiber of his life, each one, the past, the future, sewn to his heart, to that place at the center of him that houses all that he is, where a name sits with a promise.

He sat and began.

I have been many things since you left. I have been a suicide, a vagabond, a wretch, a wraith, a father, a husband, I have tried to be you, to be Sebastian, living in mimicry as a way to bring you back. I thought that if I got it right, that if I pretended hard enough and perfect enough, I would become you and we would be whole. A decade after you died I came back to life and met a woman. Her name does not matter but I married her. I loved her. She came to me as if from the dream I held onto since childhood that I have never spoken of, even to you. I only told her and it was how I proposed. I told her that I had seen a girl every night in my dreams since I was five years old. The girl began with no face and no discernible features, only the phantom of a human form. I knew she was beautiful. Perfect. Her hair was blacker than night, her eyes bright and uncanny, her frame slight. I loved her first. She was always my love and the reason for all the others. As years went by, her face formed and the features burrowed into my brain and I tried to map them onto every girl I knew, searching for her, wanting her, needing her. I found her nowhere, and so I wrote her into existence. I never let you read those novels I carried with me but they were her life and my life, all the tragedy and love of a man chasing the dream. I never stopped loving her but she disappeared from me months before I met you. And with you there was

nothing else. We shimmered in silence. I remember every moment. But, after you died, ten years passed, I met her. She was beautiful and young, fifteen years my junior. I fell in love so fully with her, as lovesick as I had been with the dream of her, and so I wrote for her now that she lived. I believed I wrote her into existence, or at least dreamt her to life. That all those dreams I spent the life of my youth dreaming created her in the womb of another through the fertilisation of my imagination. Even more, the words I wrote brought her to womanhood and bound our lives together, though it would take so long before creator met creation, and love was there from the very start. I saw her and knew, knew who she was. Those were my first words to her, I know you. You know what she said? She said, I know. She had had a dream, not like mine, but of a man who would find her one day and see her. See her, not as a body or a human, but her as an entity unquantifiable. And I did. She bore my daughter. We were married for six years and then she died. She died like you died, with my hand in hers, pulling her back from death and trying to kiss the life back into her. It didn't work with you but it might with her because I created her, she was mine to give life to and take life from, but the dream collapsed and I was left with a tiny human I never understood. A daughter with the same ravenhair. Do you remember the film we made

with Sebastian? *Songs of the Dead*. My daughter was that girl but also the perfect image of her mother. Ravenhair and violet eyes, the same woman I had dreamt for a lifetime was born again as my daughter. She does not love me. She hates me. Reviles me. I have a daughter but I do not know her. So unlike me and her mother, she was not a part of my dream. She is not a part of my life. Sometimes I think that she was not mine, that she was created by the dream of another, and her daughter will be the same, and unbroken forever. A line of woman who birth the dreams of men, who all look the same, but are not. In this way I forgot you for many years, though your name still burnt inside me. After she died, she was gone completely. I have not thought of her. I have not known her. I have not looked for her. My search for you began anew the moment she lied underground. That's why my daughter hates me so. She does not understand the love I had for her, nor will she ever know or understand how she was my first love but not my last or my true love. I longed for you so long. Have I found you?

The tears fell till he swam through them and curled himself into himself and held together only by the strength of his arms and fingers, fading fast.

He did not whisper. He did not make a sound. Curled fetally in silence, the words written but not said, he tore

a glance to the flower, its light upon him, calling through the silence, burning him from the inside and turning his skin to ice. Hands touched his eyelids and he closed them, skin goosepimpled everywhere. Exhaling, it fell from him, inhaling, he drew another in, another with the skin and body of memories and regrets. The other plunged down his throat and his stomach burning erupted. He heaved, dry and painful, until a petal was in his mouth, then another and another, and a stem, and the wings of thousands of butterflies grazed every millimeter of his millennial skin.



He opened his eyes and felt the decay deep inside. Stiff from head to toe, lungs full of glass, head pounded by mallets. His sight did not focus but funnelled and the edges blurred like cataracts.

The flower in bloom, the notebook in disarray. The floor was clean, spotless, the air absent of dust. He sat up and pushed himself to his feet, the effort buckling his knees and arms, vibrating viciously with exertion, but he found his feet. Shuffling, he turned on the tap but black sludge came instead of water, the steam rising from it, scorching the air. The windows as impenetrable and dense

as before, the fires invisible, the city vacant, the clock, 3:19,
unchanged or a full revolution.

He wiped his face and coughed, the glass in his lungs
shifting, poking through, battling his breath and sucking
it from him. Knees on fire, back numb, arthritis tearing
and combusting his movements.

it is me
youve found me
and i
you
do you belong to another
or to me
or i to you
do not stop
but bring me back
speak
write
cast out the flower
it steals you from me
and i from you
it will not stop until you live
free
you carry the chains of the past
you must choose
the past

or the future
they cannot exist together
regret
or hope
me
or you
i love you
have searched through the millennium
for you
even though it burns
and it does
it burns alive from the inside
it will not last
it burns because of you
because of us
because of sebastian
your dreams brought life
they brought death
sebastian
he dreamt this all
he dreamt the beginning and end
i have known him
he spent decades in an apocalypse
within himself
i love you

but you must choose

For years I pretended to be you to bring you back. I walked in the shoes of your ghost, wore the weight of your life. The first five years were the hardest and when I thought, truly believed, even, that I could bring you back in some way, even if it was through losing myself in you, to give up the person I was to become the person you were. I gave all I could but it was never enough. It started with a hole. I dug a hole. I bought a shovel and began to dig. I dug for hours and then a man came by and asked me what I was doing. I told him I was digging a hole, and he left, but returned a while later with a shovel and dug with me. By nightfall another man came by with his dog and a shovel but did not ask any questions. He hopped down with us and dug. When morning came we were too deep to get out so we kept digging until a handful of people came by with shovels and started digging us out of the hole and by the following night there were maybe twenty or thirty of us digging, and when the morning came a young boy asked what we were digging. In unison, I am digging. Singular, I as a we, and we as an I. The boy, not content, asked why, and they all stopped, looked from person to person, but I dug on. They began to talk for the first time and they all wondered why they were digging a hole and the first man who joined me said, This man started all of this. They

crowded round and stopped my shovelling and asked me why I was digging. I said I was digging to make a hole, and so I dug on, and some of the people joined in. When will the hole be finished, some said, and I told them that holes are never finished until they are full. By then the spell was broken and many of the diggers dropped their shovels or brought their shovels home with them. There was only me and a young man left in the hole and he asked me if I would keep digging. I nodded. He asked why. I am looking for something, I said. For what? My body. He stared at me for a long while but I kept digging. There were no bones there. Not mine or yours. The man left a short time later but I dug until the moon shown high above me. Deep in the crater I caused, I sat in my hole within the larger hole and waited. I did not sleep or dream or move. I sat in the hole until morning came once more. I had not eaten in days but that is not why I abandoned the hole. It did not work. I waited for you to come into me, for you to be me, or me to be you. I remember the way you sat in that glass box deep in the earth that took us a year to excavate. The illusion worked and we could swim through the earth, through the walls of this hole so deep, and it never looks fake. That is what everyone seems to ignore, the technical aspect, the impossibility that we achieved. At that time, it was the longest single take in film history, but no one even

bothers to mention it. No one talks about the brilliance of your performance. Your stillness, the silence, the sounds you chose to make, and how they make it human. I tried but it did not work. You know what I thought about down there? Nothing. Not you or me or anything. I disappeared in that hole, in a hole I found inside me that I never realised was there. You dug it. Your hands, your nails, your blood, your death caked every millimeter of that cavern inside me. Down in that hole within a hole, I fell deep into the hole you left in me, and my plummet did not end until the sun rose blushed above and I was filthy from days of digging and not sleeping. There is a darkness that happens in the depths of night spent in the depths of the earth surrounded by the lifesource of graveyards and plants. Within that blackness was nothing but more darkness, more blackness, more nothing. There were no thoughts and there were no sounds. A stillness and silence complete. In the morning, I knew that we achieved perfection with you in that hole. It will forever be hated, or at least as long as this world lasts, but we met perfection that day, and I think it is what claws at this cataclysm, why it is the catalyst to the end. We are never ready for perfection and it destroys us when it happens, even if only for an instant. You destroyed me. Why did you leave me? Why did you die? Did you kiss me,

even though you were gone? Did you miss me, all those days I failed to follow?

The old man's head hung, his skin sagging, his lips parted, but not in muttered syllables. Shallow breath, his eyes closed, but not tight. The room, silence. No movement but the flow of his blood, the wheeze and crackle of his lungs. The air beyond the walls stagnated as a cloud. Neither light or dark, day or night. Only grey.

Time crawled, paced, circled the apartment, but touched nothing beyond the man's age. He picked up the pen again.

Why do you say nothing? I write if only to fill space. To make sound, scratch through this silence. I need that plant there as I need you. Without the plant, the outside will take me. Without you, I long for the outside to take me. Why do you not speak? One whisper, one heartbeat, one more kiss. I will not dream again. I will not exist beyond this letter to you. These letters to you. Please, write. Live. My love is a waterfall and yours is the snow falling. Your patience will kill me, has killed me every night for years, even the ones I forgot you, breathed without you. Here is the pen. Write write write. I cannot hear you. I hear nothing. Sing for me in silence the way you did. I will know. I know I will know. Please.

He placed his head on the back of his hands on the table, and closed his eyes, held his breath. Waited.

The flower danced at the otherside of the apartment. The petals brighter, its light stronger. The walls washed purple, the air filtered through a purple haze. The scent reached him at the table, waiting. It entered his lungs, the sweetness of forgotten love as purified by the biology of plant. He spoke his name, the two syllables into the mist, cast adrift like a drunken boat. The plant took them in, and another aroma cleared the apartment, the mist gone. It reached his lungs and his tear ducts opened, his throat caught by the heart falling out of his mouth.

Please, he said. Please, touch me.

He turned to the clock, 3:19.

A scream rose in his throat and bounced about his teeth until he swallowed it down, pushing his heart back to his chest. The scent of him and the scent of the flower mingled in his lungs and turned to sulphur, muck, tar. He coughed and coughed till his bones brittled and his lungs cracked.

He picked up the pen again.

After the hole came the PI. Back then there was such a thing. You would not know now, but the world has changed immeasurably since your death. Phones are everywhere, even in pockets, and they do more than can be explained without describing the technological revolution

that occurred postmortem. I called for days looking for a female detective. When Sebastian imagined it, it stopped seeming unique, but it was painfully so. After a week I found her but she was in LA so I moved there. I bagged up my life and took a bus south and found a room to inhabit. It turned into a hole to match the hole you left. Nothing inside but a mattress and me and the one suit I could not part with. I told her I wanted to meet her, said I had a case, and she gave me an address and a time. I got lost. You know how hopeless I always have been with directions. I wandered the city all night, not even certain I was close. It rained, even. I did not think it rained in LA. For some reason I still do not. The fires make sense but not rain. I think that is why it did not shock me, the city burning down every year. I suppose you have not heard. It began a few years ago and most on the globe were unaware until now. Every year LA burns down on the lunar new year only to be born again by the first full moon. It is an old story, about the stars and the sky and the moon, but I have never heard it. A man tried to explain it to me but I could not listen, did not care. It was enough that LA died every year only to be born again, sometimes better, sometimes worse, but never quite the same. Back then, LA was still a city of roads and people, no longer one of dreams, and not yet one of gods and demons. Starless, always, though.

She left a message on my machine and asked where I was. Not asked but demanded. I phoned her in the morning and made up an excuse, something less embarrassing than being lost, but I think she knew. I met her that night. Took a taxi this time, and handed him the address, let him make sense of it. She was taller than me with wide shoulders and big breasts. A swimmer's body, strong, but pretty. Wavy hair like women from old Hollywood and shallow hazel eyes, a slim nose and square jaw. She asked me what I needed. Missing person, seven months, here is a photograph. She asked if you were an actor. He was, I said, but disappeared seven months ago. This was six months since your death, mind. Where was the last place you saw him? Home. Where was home? Here, LA. Address? I gave one I did not think existed. She never wrote anything down but somehow I knew it was in her brain and would leak out if I split her head open. More details invented, mixed with the real, and her search began. I remained in LA for six months, subsisting on hope and the thought that I could become you if she does this right, but she did not. She said she found you but lost you and that she could not continue because all roads were deadends. I thanked her and told her that you were dead. She said What, and I said, louder, Dead. Her mouth hung open, disgusted, but I left before I heard what came from her hanging lips. I imagine it was

rude and incendiary but I stopped caring for the living without you. I had this image in my head that she would figure it all out. She would confront me over whispered conversations, over trails and clues, that she would fall in love with me, obsess over me, and then realise that it was all a lie, that you were dead, had been forever. And then I would die at the moment I was most you, taken by the hand of god, the way I wrote it, and she would be left with only herself, perfect. I came to understand it all so much more, understand Sebastian and myself, so much more the deeper I plunged into the lies we invented for films no one would ever see. They were all lost for so long. For half a century, only to be brought back to life after our pursuer was also long dead. He left his heart and his desire to his biographer, and she found us, found our deepest secret, and I, only I, relived the premier that killed us all, me, you, Sebastian, and now it has killed the rest.

The tears stained the page, blurred the ink, tickled the edge of his nose, and his arm numbed from the cold. The cold covered the apartment and every inch taken by frigid air that came from nowhere. Is it you, he said, his breath condensing before him.

He fell to the ground, his bones rattling, and the images faded, evanescent hands reaching after him, the burn of ice at his center, and the wings of a thousands insects.



The clock read 3:19 and he shivered himself to wakefulness to find the apartment sweltering, his body drenched with sweat, his skin slick and moist. Petals across the floor, strewn about as if torn and kicked but the flower unwilted, not wavering in the heat. He crawled arm over arm to them, his legs numb, hips on fire. He touched the petals, carefully, an index to one and it sizzled out of existence beneath his finger. And so, too, with the next and the following eight. The petals gone, scorched into the fake wood of his apartment.

The flower blossomed in furious shades. Covering his eyes from the blaze, he held his breath and pushed away, aging and hurting more and more. He slapped his legs awake near the table and waited for the blood to flow again, to bring them back, but they did not.

Pulling the bud from the plant, he swallowed it, closed his eyes, and fell through the floor.



A purple mist, his mouth tacky, his fingers loose, a millennial fire peered through the haze past the windows. He sat up and looked through each window. Tiny stars flickered through. The plant bloomed and it spilled over the bowl it lived in, inhabiting the entire table, growing up the walls and over the floor, growing right onto him, tendrils attached, their fiery touch of bitter cold stung when he separated from it.

Standing up, he stepped away from the plant consuming the apartment, blossoming within him and stealing his life by giving him a new one. His steps weakened near the notebook but he sat and read to make it not a lie.

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me

come back to me come back to me

come back to me

come back to me come back to me

come back to me come back to me

come back to me
come back to me
come back come back come back
i need you
love you
love
i breathe and pray it works
i kiss and hope you feel
i sing the silence and promise too
i belong to you
came back for you
dont leave me
you have eaten it
chosen it
life
life past the end
life without past
i will follow you
even if you dont remember
even if you cant hear
even if you cant feel
even if i never existed at all
i will belong to you
dont die
dont leave me here amongst the living

this millennial funeral
i came for you
wont you rise for me
coursing through your atoms
a sea of life
an ocean of memories
inside you
i weave through them
i have seen your life without me
more than what you told
i have seen so much
you were always with me
but i left you
dead
i didnt mean to
dont be angry
dont be sad
i came back
for you
for you
i saw you plunge into our dreams
into sebastian
you lived his dreams
the ones you helped write
the ones you sang for

the ones i breathed life into
genevieve
i miss her too
sebastian
but mostly you
there was never more than you
all i ever needed
you
and youre gone
because i left you in the sun
travelled through hells and heavens
only to find the paradise
i first kissed in my homeland
the homeland i have lost
never needed
once there was you
dont go
please
dont leave
your heart
i plunged deep
youre not there
but i found you
a center
the hole you told me of

my name
your promise
the dream that was her
i kiss it
again and again
i feel it
your breath
your life
come back
follow me
shouting
i left you a way
signposts
come back
dont look back
walk forward
following my silent song
i will sing it all death long
if it means you belong
to me
and i to you

I heard you. Not in words or sounds but in silence, the way we used to be, the way you held me. You remember. The Cliffs of Moher, all sound gone but the wind. Voiceless above it all, every word ripped into the North Sea.

Tokyo, and we found a place in all that noise to catch an hour of silence so holy it filled us with its music for as long as we had left. Your hands on my ears, I heard them, that nothing, your breath filling my lungs, your kiss stealing my love, taking it with you past the ocean of death that I have not moved from all this time, knowing you would return. I want to tell you of the last time. The last time I tried to bring you back. Of all the many trials, this was the shortest and most painful, and it brought me back to life, gave me to that woman I had spent my life without you dreaming of. Do you remember the story of the boy with glass eyes, a metal tongue, and wooden heart? You made it up, invented it one night with after too much wine in Turin. We sat on the balcony and you sang me a song that you posthumously titled *The Boy Never Lied: A Ballad*. It was about a boy born with a wooden heart, glass eyes, and a metal tongue. Every years these objects stayed the same size, though the boy grew as all boys are wont to do. The people that he met reviled him and spat in his face but he forgave them because they could not see what he saw. With one glass eyes, the left one, I think, he saw the past, and with the other he saw the future. The present was lost to him and so he did not understand the reaction of others, why they hated him so. He did not understand that he should not have said the things he said, how he told people

of their futures and their pasts as if they happened concurrently, as if they happened right then and there. For him, they did, but for the rest, the past is private and the future is secret. This boy, the Boy of Nowhere, lived in three times but only existed in the present, the one he could not see. With his metal tongue, he could not lie because of its solidity. It takes pliable flesh to lie, manipulate the truth, bend it against teeth, against the roof of one's mouth. But his was a dense and course organ suited only to tell what was true, and so he was hated all the more, because they knew it was true, the words he said. They understood his nature but not his predicament. His heart was wood because it withered too soon, rotted and waterlogged, he never saw his tenth year, the maggots infested his chest from the inside and his chest burst as the wood expanded. He never loved because it takes meat to feel emotion. He walked alone through the present knowing both past and future, but no love, no friendship, and understanding not even a little all the hate that surrounded him. He met death and birth at the same moment twice over, at the beginning and end, the only times he was seen to smile. Do you remember? You said it was a fairytale but I knew it was not. Not like other ones. Sebastian wanted to film it but we could not adapt it and you burned our script. I did not understand but I do now, and I am sorry for trying so hard to bring

that one to life. Dreams are private. We knew that most of all, Sebastian and me, but it never stopped us. Nine years after your death, the story came back and plagued me. I shaved my head and went to a temple where I spent three months not speaking or looking at another. There were many monks there but I did not look at them and they made a point to avoid me. Never once did I speak to them. I arrived there and walked through as if I belonged and they accepted this as if I was always there. I took to sleeping beneath a tree near the edge of the temple. I ate one meal a day. A simple bowl of white rice with vegetables. They often left it for me at the temple steps at noon, or what I always imagined was noon. For three months I lived so. Do you remember this one? It was the one you wrote. The one you forbid us to premier. We did anyway because it was so beautiful. I did not understand then and it is why it did not work for those three months I was there. I believe now that if I understood you better, as I do at this moment, I could have brought you back then, made you real. But it was only emptiness for me. I lived in perfect silence for the monks did not disturb me. On the ninetieth day, I left. I do not know what the monks thought, but I imagine they thought little of it. I never returned. It was your dream. A private matter. You never told me. I never asked. I did not understand. I am sorry.

The scribbling of his pen did not stop or slow, but continued on, the neat cursive turning coarse and indecipherable. The growth stretched across the ceiling, crept over the floor, the walls pulsating with fauna, the purple haze filling the air, the bright evenstar shining brilliant from its birthplace in that consumed bowl. He wrote, faster. He wrote till blind. He wrote and the vines crawled up his leg, reached for, caressed, and bound him to the chair. The millennial fires approached, scorching the walls, melting the windows, but not cooking inside, only feeding the plant, causing it to grow exponentially, and feed him who stayed to write it all back to life. The purple haze choked out all else but hands formed from the cracks in the wall lined with soot and ash, hands that swam through the haze, a vague visage, a cold embrace, constantly fleeting, swallowed by the mist.

After I left the temple I fell into her, metaphorically and physically. I walked without seeing, walked without stepping, breathed without living, until I knocked her over, bouldered right into her tiny frame. She shouted and I helped her up and said, I know you, my reverie broken, the shroud of your life, the cloud I lived under for almost a decade dissipated and there she stood, violet eyes and the blackest hair. Caught in her sight, those irises I walked in, those pupils that swallowed me, that I swam through until

I found where her life beat from. A mountain to match my hole, my canyon, the one you dug inside me. When I came into her she came back and filled me and I forgot. I gave her a child but she gave me a life and I lived. She taught me how but took it all with her, the mountain for my canyon, the reason and way to live a life. I continued on habitually, lost in the mists of lovers' deaths. For so long I dreamt of you and not her but I knew I could not bring you back. I had tried for ten years. Tried a hundred times, a hundred ways, but nothing worked. When all I needed to do was write. Memorial missives, to compose you until I recreated you. I never thought, though it was how she came to life. First through dreams, then through words. After you, my words all fell apart and I wrote no more. That post-it in Cannes was the first thought I have written since before you died. Had I known what I already knew deepest, I would have continued. I would have lighted the path back to me. I would have sang silently for years of your touch. So much time and I have not forgotten you. I smell you still, feel your hands on me, the light kiss on my neck, but I dare not stop. If I turn to you, drop the pen, will you be there? Will you wait for me long enough to hold me as I long to hold you? Even now, the plant grows and threatens to take you from me. Your face fades, less distinct, your aroma wanes, my memories dry up and yield

no crops, no faces. The more I recall, the faster it goes, like drawing a map for this demon plant. The plant keeps me alive but steals you, the reason to live. If I survive, if it makes me young again, and I no longer know you, will it be worth it? Is it worth my life to have it back? I dare not look to it, the plant, its light mesmerises and I will be lost. It grows now even inside me, but you cling tight. Hold me closer until this is over. Whisper to me. Yes. Sing. I hear you singing. Singing silently. Let us sing together. Forever. I sit here with you, the everfading ghost of my youth, fighting to keep us both alive. I must live to bring you back, and so the plant must stay, though it eats you. To lose it is to lose you and me and you. The silence replaced by its pulsing lifeforce. I hear it. Can you hear it? My legs now covered and I dare not look, dare not avert my eyes from the page less it be snatched away, consumed like the rest. You are still here. I feel your heartbeat but I cannot remember it. My hand grows stronger, my breathing easier, my heart faster, but you slip away, your deadlife falling from me. Hold on. Hold on. I will buoy you to my life, tie your lost life to mine, and carry you through the millennial purge at my door. At our door. I say a name but I cannot remember. Your name. Whisper it to me. Please. If I lose it, your name, the prayer I feed on, please tell me. Do not let go. Hold tight, feel my hand on yours. My skin is on fire with your

electric touch, the hush of thousands of wings, like all the fireflies I kept once in jars a thousand miles from here and almost a century ago. With you, I give my life, the life sucked from me, exchanged, and recreated. My love grows weak, my heart lives stronger. Where are you? Please.

The plant grew over him but the touch disintegrated. He grabbed at the leaves, the vines, and ripped them away, pulling, screaming, disconnecting his life to its. He stuck fingers down his throat and wretched until the stems and leaves and petals fell from his mouth in a pile of purple bile. He pulled his legs from the floor they bound to. His limbs aged the more he unplugged, the less connected to life he became. His legs unsteady, cracking, creaking, the years flooded back into him, his lungs broken, his heart splintered, he shuffled through the vegetation, the fauna of his apartment until he reached its heart, the plant he carried home with him only days before when the fires were far away and not pushing on the windows.

He ripped the flower from the root and crumbled it in his hands, ripped it apart, its icefire scalding his hands, and it turned to ash. He pulled at the roots in the bowl and they came away, meter after meter, dug through the floor, thick as his arm, and his strength failed him but he pulled on, a name returning, two syllables, and he wheezed and

sputtered blood from his lips, his heart hammering and pleading against this race towards demise.

The roots came away and he threw them on the floor where they shrivelled like the left behind skin of great snakes and turned to cinder and then smoke. He pulled the plants from the walls but they rotted and disintegrated before his hands made contact. The air stunk of sulphur, of dead memories, and old ghosts. He hurried, body collapsing, molecules breaking to atoms, his body shelling, leaving only a name, a promise, and a dream.

The pen in hand, he pushed his shaking fist on, the rest of his body numbed, burning from within, decomposing with the effort.

Come back to me I killed it come back just one more time only for one last kiss Alec Alec Alec Alec I say it too to make it true to bring me back to you Alec Alec Alec Alec Alec alec alec alec come back to me if for only this for this last time for a touch a whisper a silent song please come back I need you I loved you anywhere even after death I promise to love you and we shall be together past this burning millennium we shall rest and be made whole come back please I can do no more Do you remember I remember your eyes and that scar bisecting your left eyebrow and the stitches you had on your chin to cover the exposed bone from the rock that your cousin threw when he saw

us together when you loved me anywhere and everywhere
remember me as I remember you they flood back but I lose
me dying or not breathing only once please kiss I need only
one I sing you a song hear me follow my voiceless words

His hand trembled to stop, clinging to the pen, to his
heart. His head on the table, his breath failing, his lungs
shrivelling, but his heart still beat. His blood lived.



He opened his eyes when the windows shattered and
the glass rained onto the floor, the inferno burn-
ing, roaring, raging, his skin slick with sweat and urine.
The clock, 3:19. He smiled and felt a hand touch his, meat
and memory, the brush against his parted cracked lips. An
impression of nose and chin, gone before the smile reached
the corners of his mouth. He raised his head and pushed
himself on buckled knees to stand. The pyre called out,
singing violently. A young girl stood watching him. A girl
with ravenhair and violet eyes. She wore a clean and pure
dress the color of new dawns, of bright stars, and harvest
moons, evershifting, transient.

She stepped towards him and his mouth opened to
speak but she took his hand and the tears rivered down his

face until they evaporated and steam filled the air before his eyes. She looked into his eyes and steadied his steps. She led him through the door of the apartment without speaking. They walked down the three flights of stairs and out into the street. He saw nothing but the blinding smoke, felt nothing but his skin melting and her fingers, holding his own lightly, but with great strength. The only smell, sulphur and his own burning flesh, and then, hints of another scent. of petals in the rain, whispered syllables, lover's sweat, living memories and burning pasts.

He followed her through the mist and saw at intervals two bright purple stars a million miles away but only beyond his fingertips. He followed on broken steps over a collapsing earth. He did not breath but he did not need to. His heart no longer beat but his blood still lived, if only for the promise, the name, the dream.

They reached the shore, the sand sucking at his feet and he disintegrating to sand and mixed with what lied there. The fires had not reached the ocean where they might be purified and the cloud dissipated. He watched the sun sink into the ocean then rise again bloomed like rose petals and then back through the horizon leaving the stains of lilac wine on the moon peering through the atmosphere, a constant dance between sister lights, the retreat of moon, the emergence of sun, a celestial ballet.

The water lapped against his fast failing body and the cold water solidified him, made him whole enough to keep standing. They stopped and stared out into the ocean, the sun and moon weaving, waving. He turned to her.

I'm not living, am I, he said.

She looked into his face, her own made of porcelain, shining and pure, smooth. She did not speak but her eyes opened wide and he stared at her staring at him and he fell to his knees, eyes tied to hers, but body facing the ocean. Hands on his shoulders like the faint brush of a breeze, butterflies and almost kisses.

She took his face in her hands and breathed into him. His body slumped, held up by her hands, and she placed his head down into the water, singing a wordless song.