



Rooms in the Third Person

Ver 1.11 - you can (not) cultivate meaning



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Hands

Your halo adorned of another
molten gold throbbing
the colours of spilled petrol
rushed in
to feathered mango
and electric blue when it's too close.
You watch the mirror
and follow the light
to the hands over your eyes.

The salt in the sky
unclasp
Bitter grass on your tongue
unclasp
A brush through tangled hair
unclasp
A call at 4 am
unclasp
The hum of the monitor in the black
greeting milliners
as the walls resolve
unclasp
Head to lap to lap to lap
unclasp
Sun through smudged window,
stem through floorboard
unclasp
The players staged by spotlight on the fen
(petrol generator and a '73 bus)
follow the cow's lead
unclasp
Blood run down your leg
unclasp
Cut chillies
in a metal bowl
unclasp

Raised above,
that was ten if you were keeping count,
raised above your head to shelter from the rain
new limbs in the mirror
more hands over your eyes.

Some will pinch
some will scratch
coated in dust
in honey

in mud
red raw and blistered picking
the sun.

Cupped before your lip
to feed you lean in
to the palm on your cheek
thumb to your eyelashes
fingers to your hair entwined
in your hold
threaded past your thigh
across your back
set between collar and throat.

One hangs above
splayed like Damocles.
Do not fear death from here
they aren't so petty.
Skin pulled down
flesh dissolving in the stream
though maybe you walk a little lighter
but I shan't spoil the end.

Arms bathed
in fabrics you've never known
perfumed in scents
the clouds have hidden.
You'll try to reach back
but t never works.

After all and after all
back to the mirror,
like the horizon over the sea
in the morning fog
like the taunts from the amphitheatre
as the sun goes down
like the ashy rifles
come out the shadows and into the square
just are
the sum of no parts



Cut to Noise

It was carpet in the sense that it wasn't wood. You could already see the procession of scraped knees and red palms. The room was homely but only in the ways it could be meant by a lettings agent.

'Hiromi...'

She was distracting herself. She knew she was distracting herself.

'We can't do a big fight again. We had no choice but to sell. Samuel was gonna have to take out that second mortgage and Julie's mother has to move in with her.'

Allen looked as tall as he was, hunched over his desk and perpetually poised to slide off the cushions (again, not wood) of his armless office chair. A bulbous computer rested in front of him, every inch of white, keyboard and mouse included, yellowed from a nasty habit his mouth had never quite managed to perceive as nasty.

'No, don't worry about that.' Hiromi's heart wasn't quite in it the first time. 'I was just wondering if I should say something, you know, on air.'

'Well, your contract rolls over for a few months, but you never know with these people.' Allen squeezed a finger under his glasses and rubbed. 'I don't even really know what they want.'

'Buy everything until you're the only one left.'

A community television station was, unsurprisingly, a place where Hiromi had become reacquainted with a few hobbies she had mostly kept to herself. Rummaging through the boxes of old tapes she'd picked up some dice. She'd never had to roll for integrity before but it occurred to her now that the action probably spoke for itself. It landed on a two but she hadn't yet established what that meant.

The patter of the rain had long since faded into the background, just as the electrical hum that seemed to stay until all the lights were off. But the wind picked up and the rain knocked itself back into focus with the sound of a hose thrust towards a car window.

Hiromi was going to say something.

The broadcast couldn't help feeling like a eulogy. For who she wasn't exactly sure. The sheer number of formats that composed the archives meant nobody had a full grasp on the people who had been a part of the station. The place had always changed, that was its charm, but Hiromi knew this was different.

White flashed from the windows and thunder rumbled overhead. It was impactful in its novelty but in the grand history of thunderstorms, it appeared the heavens were not particularly invested in this day. The lights went out.

Julie's eye was stuck to the viewfinder. They had long since obtained monitors but her right eye had always remained squeezed shut. Nyasha had her head pressed into her forearm, her headphones ever so slightly pushed over the edge of her ears. There is supposedly a difference between sonic purity and sleep but the end product spoke for itself. Sam stared into the black feed; his hand stretched over the back jiggling wires he'd never quite known the purpose of individually.

'Bugger,' said Hiromi.

↑ THE RIVER KING

All Hail the River King, Hail
Charon on this plane
ashes to dust, falling blue
all around.

Hear the chorus of ancient tongue
singing hymns for the sacred earth,
from the circling ribbon
pitched on a stool of twisted branches,
sprouted from the pleasant green.
Magnetic tape spinning disintegrating loops.

Then, when the sky turns black
but the sun never sets,
a navy fit for a viking
to rape and pillage again and again.

Torn tents, dissolving along the bank
abandoned by the summer fete.
The haunt of the soothsayer.
Burning candles,
a veil of perfumes,
assorted skulls,
rejected memento mori,
as if anybody forgot,
a deck of tarot,
and a crystal ball,
though that one was always a little gauche,
now fallen out of favour.

Antlers trace the veins of the moon
drawing the light of the stars into the beasts of the night
and, sometimes, a large toad.
It seems of the Mister variety.

Yes, your palace only floats now
but you might be alright in the rising tides.
Though your vessel isn't built for the open water.
Still, the library is wonderful,
shelves of stained Americana
farmers, and homesmen, and salesmen, and hiredmen,
pronouns deemed period appropriate,
the purity of capital torturing the soul
without the complications of history.
Well, nothing is guilt free.

It felt like fortuitous circumstance even then,
that mass of people,
the wine and the fairy lights and the summer dresses,
the delicate flowers that had just about tangled themselves in the railing
and you knew them all
well, you knew two or three
and one was a cunt
But that's all you really get.

All Hail the River King, Hail
Unmoored but heavy
Chained but uncovered
a few canals flesh out your empire.

A Poem Not Endorsed by the Coca Cola Corporation

Why drink

a coke over the sink?
In a suit your mother once bought you
no less.

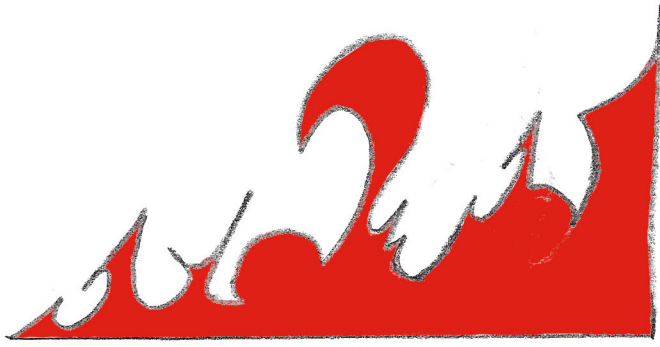
The wind
listens, but doesn't look
it might need corrective surgery
still, you suspect it wouldn't be too harsh to your face
grown accustomed to
the halfsmile of an acquaintance.

You used the word mellow Once
not the numerical value
 Well,
 Maybe,
in a cosmic sense of truth.

The tiles are faded and sunbleached
and the dust swirls like sardines in warm currents-
the flowers on the curtains will go too, soon
everybody gets old eventually,
 you just you
thought you'd be old before you cared.

You thought if you didn't belong anywhere
you'd feel alright everywhere
but it didn't quite work out
and, to be honest, you never had such intentional goals.

The coyote crawls away from the bins
Along rubber sunk tarmac
usually he leaves hungry
But today apple pie.



With bare feet

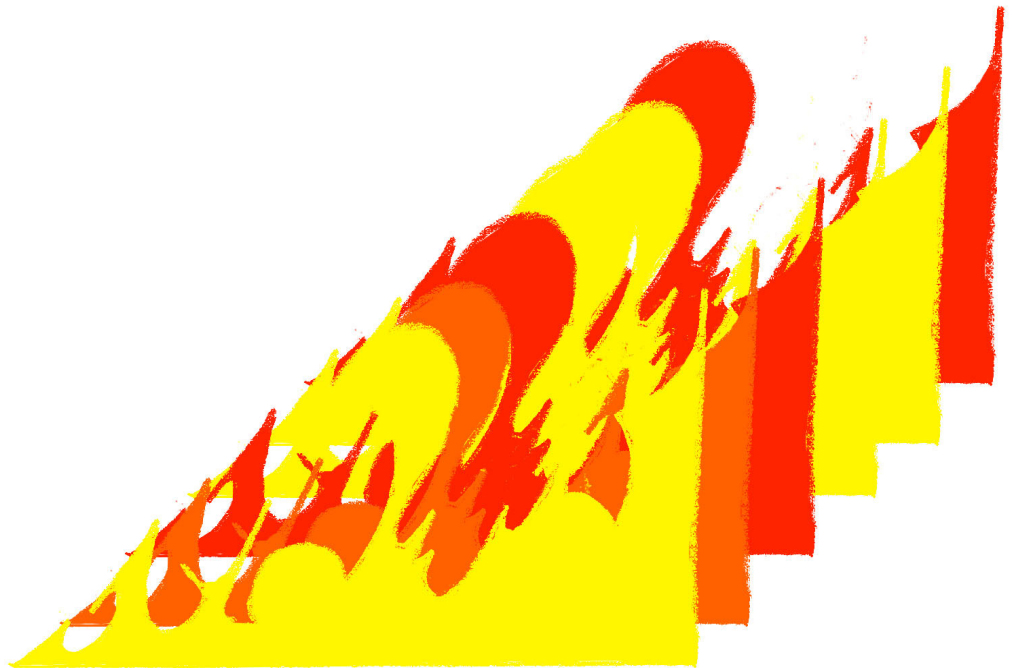
The house was built for tracks that never came. A few congressional dinners, bills noted far above their worth. Plans drawn over plans drawn over plans. The winds changed. It was hard to know who was hocking snake oil; harder still to know who weren't. It may not have been by train, but somebody got moved by them foundations.

My Grandmother stuck through sixty-two years of marriage for that place. She got hit for sixty-one of them. He stopped after the first stroke, started again after the second. I was in a black dress, carrying sandwiches on a silver plate. Dust was swirling in the smudged light. Or maybe it was snow. Either way I fell. Banged my knee, fractured in three places. Nobody ate any sandwiches.

It always sounded like the sea to me. Well I ain't never been to the sea, but it sounded like it. The wind rushing as the cars drove past out front. And the birds singing, always out of sight. The ceiling was leaking real slow at first. I put a teacup down. Reckoned it should be fixed up before it filled. I put a saucer underneath. The ceiling came down.

The water hung like wallpaper, sparkling in the sun. Diamonds under stage light. Curtains waved in morning dew. The embroidery, after this long, had forgotten the key it started in. The candle weren't much help in the fog but it kept the coyote warm. A park bench of vertical spikes crackled in the fires. Now there's nothing but flowers. And an epitaph for the pizza hut.

They came every day. A shingle, a brick, a floorboard, a nail. Piece by piece it vanished. I've walked past there, with bare feet and empty stomach. And I've read books you know, about boats picked apart and put back together. But I know that ain't theirs.



Shoshanna

Chapter 1: A Stranger in a Strange Land

I must remember to buy tobacco. That man's hat is far too small for his head. The new century will be me last, I'm not sure I'm capable of another. What am I allowed to take? Maybe it's a child's hat. The oil rigs reach above the buildings now; they look like towering headstones. Did I miss my last chance? That fruit is rotten. The cobbler's still open. No, he just has a giant head. She thought, in pieces and fragments, throughout the day.

Steam rose up to Shoshanna's eyes. Its ghostly paint coloured the sun and dust that hung in the air of the kitchen. She buried her fingers into thick, dark, brown curls that hugged her head and pulled the sunhat she was wearing away from the momentarily straightened strands that followed it. She placed the hat upturned beside her. Her hair had been cut recently, just below the chin; the same way it had been done for as long as she could remember. She grabbed a folded towel from the counter and used it to lift the boiling pot off the range.

The garden was hemmed in by a tall wooden fence that cast deep shadows onto the ground. Shoshanna had come to know the quiet march of these shadows quite well. She knew her round tin bath stood best in the far-right corner of the dusty garden. She dumped the contents of her pot into the half-filled bowl. She pinched the wispy white fabric at the inner crook of her left elbow, pulled it up, and plunged her olive hand into the water. It was warm enough. She held her hand away from her body and shook it vigorously, her face scrunching up automatically.

She undressed, folding her shirt and long blue skirt carefully before putting them down. Both arms were held braced against the sides of the bath as she lowered herself gently into the basin. She bent her neck and brought her cupped hands towards her face. Her fingertips pressed the space around her eyelids while the water ran down her chin. The hairs on her arm stood on end as it was held above the water. She ran a wet cloth briskly across it. The garden was nothing spectacular, a few patches of rebellious Kentucky bluegrass sprouting from the dusty ochre, but she had always loved the singing wildflowers that crept up the porch. A door opened. Somewhere in the house a door opened. Papers hitting a table, footsteps on board, and then a face.

'Oh! Please excuse me Mr Rhys, I'm not decent.'

'No matter, nothing I have not seen before.' He spoke with a slow arhythmic lilt.

Shoshanna pulled a towel to her chest as Rhys strode over.

'I apologise, I was not expecting company, what brings you here?' She bared her teeth in a shape she hoped was a smile.

'Well, I had some documents for Joaquin, I thought it be only proper I deliver them myself.'

'Do they concern me?'

'No, no, business dealings, above your head, I would not worry yourself with the details.'

'Then may I ask what you want to discuss.'

'Why so formal Shoshanna? We have known each other since, well, since you were this high.' His bare palm landed awkwardly on her head. 'You were a pretty little thing.'

She pushed his hand away as delicately as she could force herself to. 'It's just my husband will be back soon and I haven't even started preparing dinner.'

'Oh I don't believe he will be back for a while. He is very busy today I know that. Besides, it is not fair that he shall have you all to himself, I know what a stern man he can be.' He turned his head to the door behind him and tuned back. 'You smell divine.'

'...I'm bathing.' Shoshanna eyed the empty pot on her left side. 'And I have not even offered you a drink. Please allow me to make myself proper and we can continue in inside.'

‘You are perfect as you are, a diamond in the coal mine.’ He knelt down, forced his face towards hers, and thrust his hand into the water.

‘No, Mr Rhys, please.’ She held her hand straight against his chest.

‘Don’t worry about your husband, you know I have helped him a lot in his life.’

‘I don’t want to.’

He held his head back slightly. His hand remained. ‘Now that does hurt my feelings.’

‘It’s just--’

‘I am a nice, respected man Shoshanna.’

‘I know—’

‘I can do incredibly generous things for you.’

She didn’t try to interject this time.

‘And, I could make things quite difficult. There are grim consequences for laying with another man, but I could make that they never come to light; that the act may not even be known. But if I were to walk away unsatisfied, I could not stop the full force of the law from punishing the lecherous acts I walked in on today, between you and the boy from town, as I was just delivering some papers.’

Shoshanna looked to the dull brown planks around her, she could see nothing beyond.

‘It would pain me to see such a beautiful face covered in dirt’

She breathed.

‘I’m glad you have come to your senses’

She held herself still.

Rhys undid his belt and dropped his trousers. A door opened.

‘Shit.’ He clutched his trousers in one hand and stumbled over himself to the fence. He climbed over.

Chapter 2: Untangled Roots

‘Did you get the tobacco?’

‘It’s on the shelf.’

The chair scraped across the floor as Joaquin pushed himself away from the table. He got up, sauntered to the shelf, grabbed the tobacco, and sat back down. He slid the empty plate in front of him away and shifted his weight back and forth as he reached into each of his pockets. After he had sifted through all of them, most empty, he managed to lay in front of him a box of matches, some papers, and the tobacco. He started rolling.

Shoshanna had married not long after her father died. Cancer. Her Mother passed when she was very young, she never did ask the exact details. Shoshanna knew she was a kind woman, a thoughtful woman; they had shared eyes. Her Father had moved them to this country, strangers, when he had felt them becoming strangers in their own. He made the distinction, strangers here and strangers there, a horrid mixture of supposed subtleties, but he could never untangle the roots. She often missed him and wished he was still here. Right now, she did not.

She wondered whether to tell Joaquin what had happened. She couldn’t stop herself being unsure of the way he’d react. Certainly she was unsure of the ways Rhys could react. Anyway, she’d be okay now. Rhys wouldn’t say anything now, it was too complicated. Though she wouldn’t bathe alone again.

There was a knock at the door. Joaquin, inhaling smoke, got up and walked over. He received a long envelope. He shoved a finger into the fold ripped it open and started reading.

‘You have disrespected me.’ He did not yell. He wasn’t a man who yelled.

‘I have done no such thing.’

He threw the letter down on the table. He wouldn’t look her in the eye. ‘I gave you a roof over your head and food in your stomach and you have disrespected me.’ He shook his head. ‘I should have listened to my father.’

She didn’t get chance to read the letter, in truth she didn’t want to. The words sat in her stomach

before they ever touched her eyes. She knew what was there, catching singular words, and it was terrifying. 'Joaquin it's not true.'

'Who was it?

'There weren't nobody to be.'

'Rhys saw you with his own eyes.'

'He-- he attacked me. I was in the garden alone and he came and he wanted me to, to--'

'Even in your lies you are a whore.'

'He said he would do this, If I didn't- he said he would tell them--'

'Get the fuck out of my house.'

'But--'

'I am not a violent man,' he gripped her at the top of her arm and forced her to her feet, 'but I am telling you now to get out of my fucking house.'

She walked herself out of the front door.

'You're expected in court tomorrow. I won't be there.'

The letter landed, spinning in the air, to her right. The door shut hard behind her. Shoshanna rubbed the heel of her palm across the outside corner of each eye. The tears were dried in the creases of her folded arms. She walked forward briskly, away from the house and into town. She concentrated on returning her breathing to a normal pulse as she walked to the only place she could think to go.

Chapter 3: No part of it

The sun hung low in the sky now, the fires hidden beneath the horizon rising again to the surface. The main street was quiet, people had quite happily retreated indoors. There were two deep brown horses tied to the boxy wooden building Shoshanna was walking towards. They lapped easily at the trough in front of them.

A man knocked a pencil to the floor as he shifted his crossed feet from the top of the desk to the floor. 'What can I do for you little lady.' He dug his knuckle into the stubble on his cheek.

Shoshanna placed herself on the chair opposite. 'I need your help sheriff Daniel.'

'Well, that's just what I'm here for. Tell me what happened.'

'Rhys forced himself on me, and, and now he's--'

Daniel leant forward over the desk, 'well now I thought I recognised you, Joaquin's wife isn't it? 'What was it again?' He flicked a finger towards her, 'Shoshanna, right?' The pronunciation was at least two syllables too long but he was pleased with his recollection.'

'Please, I need your help.'

'Believe me I'm aware of the case, I know how much help you need.

'And so what can we do?'

'Given the circumstances darling I hope you'll be able to understand my lack of sympathy.' He pointed to the cage to his side. 'I'll be honest this guy's prospects are looking better than yours.' The man inside started laughing. 'Shut the fuck up,' Daniel barked.

'It's all lies sheriff, I don't know, he's trying to protect himself; he's trying to get away with something vile.'

'He told me you'd say that.'

'Well that's just fucking strange right?'

'Man of his stature, he's just being cautious, he's protecting himself.'

'So you're aware of his reputation.'

'Among a certain class of people who'd have a lot to gain if they ever had any conviction in their claims, yes'

'You're a connected man, you know him better than that.'

'Yes, I've been privy to some mutual gatherings, he is just friendly man; he likes people. If somebody were to misread anything, well, that would be their fault.'

'You know something is wrong, you need to see the truth.'

‘Now you listen here, I’ve devoted the better part of my life to the truth and I don’t need some lecherous bitch telling me otherwise.’ He was a man who yelled. ‘You could stand to learn some respect. You want to know the real truth? Ain’t none of us be standing here if it weren’t for that man Rhys. He put this town on the map.’

‘Your maps.’

‘It’d do you good to remember you got a reputation yourself.’

‘Now, what is that supposed to mean?’

‘You stand trial tomorrow, it’s between you and him, I’ll have no part of it.’

Shoshanna got up and walked out the door.

Chapter 4: I Believe You

The ground turned blue under the full moon. The silver face stood as bright as a half-sun., Shoshanna would hear her footsteps the loudest whenever the air was this damp. She perched outside the sheriff’s office, she knew it was empty but she listened anyway. She strode straight past the desk and into the back room. She began carelessly pulling open desks, cupboards and drawers. She carried a lever action rifle, a six shooter, and a collection of ammunition as she walked out.

‘If I were to scream now I reckon I could make a mighty loud noise.’ It was that man again, hanging off the iron bars. ‘He keeps the keys in the top right drawer.’

‘You know I reckon this’d be mighty loud too,’ She held up the rifle, ‘I know what I’d rather be caught for.’

She reached the doorway.

‘For what it’s worth I believe you.’

She had stopped moving before she could decide to.

‘Ain’t no sane man would touch your kind.’

Shoshanna untied the horse and leapt onto its back.

Daniel stumbled out of the bar. He spotted Shoshanna moving away and he started to run. He yelled as he went, as far Shoshanna could make out, to ‘stop’ and ‘getyherbfuckbageer.’ He clung to the doorframe of the back room, rocking back as he looked in. ‘Shit.’ He dove on to the desk and grabbed the keys to the cell. He braced himself on a bar as he stared blankly at the keyhole. He lifted the keys. Clink. He closed one eye. Clink. He closed the other. Clink. ‘Fuck.’ He threw the key forward. It clashed against the metal and spun towards the floor of the cell. ‘Get help.’

He clambered onto the other horse and gave chase. Shoshanna was just ahead, riding out of the main street and out of town. She looked back and saw him clinging harshly to the reigns. Daniel reached to his waist and pulled his revolver from its holster. His thumb fumbled the hammer back as he swung his arm up. He pointed the barrel straight ahead, just below his right eye, and pulled the trigger.

A handful of dirt was thrown up eight and half feet to Shoshanna’s southwest. Daniel’s horse reared up and writhed as it sought to escape the piercing ringing that was now stalking its right side. Daniel hit the ground hard and the breath was shoved out of his body; he heaved violently and soon the contents of his stomach was shoved out too. Then everything went black.

Shoshanna pulled on the reigns, the hooves underneath crossing themselves delicately as she turned towards the motionless body. He probably wasn’t dead. He could be. He could probably make it back alone. He might not. Shoshanna didn’t feel any sympathy but she couldn’t help feeling bad. She walked her horse back to him. He smelt like rot and somehow, he looked it too. She tied him to the back of her horse and continued on to Rhys’ house just outside of town.

Chapter 5: Me and Him

A cobble walkway through an ocean of lazy blue greeted Shoshanna as she made her way quietly to the verandah. She left her horse among the rose bushes that ran around the entrance. Daniel was

there, his body slumped over. As far as Shoshanna could tell he was breathing; she didn't want to get too close.

Shoshanna crept towards sighing veils that reached outside the first-floor window. There was nobody inside so she stepped in. It was the dining room; It was gorgeous. She gripped the rifle with both hands as she pressed forward. She leant into the foyer and saw the staircase that rose out of the ground. it was quiet downstairs. She went up. Still gripping tightly, she saw an open door. Out of it a soft orange glow beat back against the deep moonlight. Leading herself with the outstretched rifle, she stepped in.

There was a window to the front of the house but Rhys hadn't seen her; he was set too far back, sat at a desk against a wall of bookshelves. She stood still, his head in her sights but she didn't know exactly what to say.

'What do you want?' He was locked still, his mouth offering only an unstable soft tone.'

'You need to make things right.'

'You need to calm down Shoshanna, before you do something you'll regret. You'll have a lot more to deal with if you bloody your hands now. This is just a misunderstanding. If you just put the gun down, we can have a reasonable—'

'I don't need to do anything.'

'I shouldn't have sent that letter, I panicked, but you must understand the dangers of a man in my position. I could never hurt you; I would have never let anything bad happen.'

'You tried to rape me.'

'no, no, no Shoshanna. You don't know me; I would never do such a thing. You were just so beautiful there, can you blame me for taking a chance?'

'Yes.'

'You said yes.'

'No, I didn't.'

'You wanted it, you never said no. Do you expect me to read your fucking mind?'

'You threatened to kill me.'

'I was just teasing.'

Outside the sky cracked. It was the sound of a ship being dashed against the rocks by a thousand waves. A low roar hung in the air.

'Oh I am seen.' Tears started dripping from Rhys' eyes. 'Providence does strike the sinners.' Rhys stared directly into her eyes. 'Shoshanna, please, you must forgive me. I wronged you, I admit, but it is not too late. I can fix everything.'

Daniel stepped into the room.

'Sheriff Daniel, thank God, a reasonable man. She just broke in here and started pointing that thing at me. I just said what I thought would make her happy.'

Daniel held his revolver up. 'I heard enough already Rhys, I'd be right to blow your head off right now.' He nodded his head at Shoshanna.

She didn't gesture towards an acknowledgement. 'What the fuck was that.'

'Blowout down yonder,' Daniel walked to the window, 'rig must have caught a spark.'

'You've gotta think this through Daniel.'

'Think fucking what through Rhys?'

'I got a lot of work to do here Daniel. To make Our community better. I can't do that in jail.'

'Who said anything about jail?' Daniel cocked the gun and pointed it at Rhys. 'Way I see it there's a simple solution here, life for a life.'

Shoshanna peered out the window, she wasn't interested in the conversation. 'who is that?' A horse carrying a large cart rolled up the front door. A group of six or seven men filed out.

Daniel turned his head. 'Ah, shit.'

'What.'

'I may have asked the man in the cage for a little hand.'

'I thought this was between me and him.'

‘Well all I saw was you running off with all my guns. I had to do something. If you had just explained to me what was really going on I wouldn’t have had to—’

Shards of glass shattered as they hit the floor

‘Shit!’ Each of them shouted that or something similar as they dove to the nearest wall.

Shoshanna saw Rhys’ eyes point to the door behind him.

‘What are you doing?’

Shoshanna took aim as Rhys crawled to the exit

‘We’ve got to look after our community.’

Chink. The gun jammed. Shoshanna struck the lever and a case jumped out of the rifle. He was already gone. She ran to the stairs.

She clung to the banister as her feet tapped down. As she touched the floor, she gripped hard and threw herself at the dining room. She could see the window.

Daniel grabbed her arm and pulled her back. ‘I’ll keep you safe, stay close to me.’

The front door blew open as a mass of men flooded in, guns in hand. From then there was only the sounds of splintering wood and gunpowder bangs. Shoshanna was pulled to the floor as Daniel tried to rush them behind the couch at the front of the room. She managed to get off a shot. A body dropped. The men turned towards the drawing room. A bullet stuck Shoshanna’s lower leg. She screamed. Daniel shot through into the crowd. A pheasant’s worth of feathers was blown out of the sofa. Shoshanna launched herself to the back of the room with her other leg. She kicked and clawed along the floor, blood streaking behind her. Daniel followed after firing blindly. Another body dropped. The mirror above the fireplace fractured like glitter shot from a cannon. Shoshanna hung behind the chair at the back of the room. She pulled sharply at the skirt that was glued to her leg. Something ripped. The light in the room faded as the thick, black, smoke of the oil well saturated the sky. She fired at the men who were trying to take cover opposite. Flashes of fire ripped through the darkness. Another body dropped. The concentration of shrieking volleys was as loud as ever. Shoshanna eyed the back door in the kitchen at the back of the house. Daniel ran out of bullets. She grasped her pistol and fired repeatedly into the air as she fell into the kitchen. A man appeared in the doorway opposite. Daniel took a run at him. He forced the man’s gun into the floor. His foot slipped underneath him as he was thrown hard into a cupboard. Ceramic clashed on top of him. Shoshanna lifted the rifle and fired. Another body dropped. Her elbow struck the floor as she slipped on the blood underneath her. She crashed out of the back door.

Her eyes burnt out here. She could barely see through the sheet of black let alone the tears filling her eyes. She struggled around the edge of the house, her limbs hitting the wood. Daniel was behind her. She followed the sound of her horse gasping through the fog. She climbed up, cut the rope; Daniel got on behind her and they rode away.

Chapter 6: Feet of Clay

Shoshanna’s breathing was heavy. The sky was still black but her eyes hurt less. She stopped the horse and pushed Daniel off. His legs buckled as he hit the ground.

‘What are you doing?’ Daniel asked pushing himself up.

‘I’m done.’

‘But you’re so close.’

‘You saw it all. They’ll listen to you.’

‘We could bury him right now. We could fix it. We could make it right.’

‘I’m not going back.’

‘So you’re just going to run away.’

There is nowhere to run to. There is rot in the ground. I had nothing, I had nothing and I still somehow lost it all. I barely made it through; bloodied and bruised and now I must fix it? I can’t help anybody now and I wouldn’t even know where to start. I shouldn’t even have to. I didn’t even do anything; this all started because of him. And now I’ll have to carry a gun on my back wherever I go.

And in the end I'm the lucky one. One day these feet of clay will collapse the whole thing but you will never see with the golden crown wrapped around your eyes. She thought, in pieces and fragments.

'Goodbye Daniel.'

She rode only away. Somewhere beneath the black cloud, a sun was apparently rising.

Eurydice's Song (for the black keys)

Oh Orpheus,
who is the man that wouldn't turn back
when we know fate is such a funny thing.
Each of us could slip and fall in the bath love
when we're alone. Forward or back,
why do you see selfishness on both sides now?

Eye to ear
when you hear my voice, you don't believe me
the simplest affirmation of us
but I understand you only disbelieve yourself.

Why did you walk in this room love?
my breath fogging glass.
Did you forget?
your hand underneath the doorframe.

Come here, strum your sand risen lyre
sing the lies that are true enough for a moment
and I'll sing back
for an extra second of clarity.

Don't worry
I won't absolve you,
you wouldn't want it anyway.
Did you remember to lock the doors love?
who knows what comes in the dark.
You will have to cross rivers, the same as I
but I'll have a little help.



nstructions for a Great Fog

(to be sung at every dawn as best as can be told)

It is not for you to find now
But what was foraged was truly beautiful,
In every sense,
Which could only mean no sense at all.

What disappears in the weeds
Your happiness, your joy, your guilt, your fear,
Perhaps some instincts are best lost in the woods,
But we know what may come with an errant deer.

For you. Now. It is to love.
In every face and every eye,
Each one unique,
Underneath the sun.

Starlight at Dawn

The sum of no parts,
Watercolours on flooded paper
The horizon over an ocean
Sand spilling over nails
Blood run down a leg
into mud
A knife wrapped in silk
Curtains in a hurricane
A rose twisted verandah
Soft light off a mirror-ball
The purple line strikes me
Splayed fingers
New words
An open shoulder
Old tears
A precious earring
Weightless posture
A glove of golden bangles
A Straight back
Shimmering lips
And darkened eyes.



Abridged launch sequence approved.
Initial check all clear.
Abnormal reading in sector twelve.
Reading outside critical failure parameters in accordance with emergency protocol five.
Contact.
Ignition.
Fire.
Velocity following normal curve.
Fuel consumption normal plus minus point two millilitres.
Altitude rising at normal rate.
Initiating pitch correction in thruster 4b.
Reserve level sixty two percent.
Parabolic Alignment successful.
Sufficient velocity for atmosphere breach.
Breach in point eight seconds.
Gate cracked.

The array dazzled, points cycling through every synthetic colour, singing like a warm chorus of birds, chirping through a hundred cycles of reel-to-reel magnetic tape, quietly landing on their closest approximation to the outside. Fraw saw the stars. An accidental wreath for the silver moon. The sun tilted over the falling Earth, light streaming relentlessly through the clouds. Fraw swept her leg underneath herself, her hand, softly extended, passed the edge of her lips.

Arm second position Leg fourth position behind.
Initiate LCR burn.
Interval steady four seconds.
The Earth began rising.
Fuel depleted.
Eject debris.
Air body friction confirmed.
Temperature climbing normally.
Acceleration point one metres per second per second slow.
Prediction shows target velocity within eye.
Sub-optimal weather patterns.
Pilot optical link in eclipse.
Entering frost layer.
Leg one leg two temperature dropping
Arm one arm two temperature dropping.
Core shielded.
Head in regress.
Prediction shows insufficient temperature in eye.
Catalyse Wing combustion early.
Wing ignited.
Temperature to intercept normal curve in five point six seconds.
Prediction shows successful blink within eye.
Feathers burned.
Cleansed until perdition.
Entering eye in point two.
Blink.

Fraw saw three white shadows floating above the hills. A long arm reached back and bent forward, buried into its scalp, pulling back hair, the head straining for the ground, water pouring hard into its face. Birds pecked at the other's eyes, arcing up and knotting sinew as they flew. The other was collapsed, thin, hollow, and gasping for breath. Fraw's head struck the left side array.

Blood dripped to her cheek. Her head felt warm. She was used to the smell of iron. She pushed back and twisted into position. The Chassis caught the ground, pulled its legs back from the sky, and pushed itself upright. She didn't get a good look at the Angilassus. Eyes and teeth all over its form, surrounded by a geometry of blood. A leaking halo of molten gold scorched its flesh, hissing swollen vapour into the clouds, coloured like spilled petrol.

The Chassis engaged its knife and started at the Angilassus, ripping into its body and tearing the film off a misplaced eye. It screamed over itself a thousand times each pitch delayed by a microsecond. Fraw gritted her teeth and thrust her hands to her ears. The Angilassus threw the Chassis, ripping off two fingers lodged in its flesh. Her back struck metal as she hit the ground.

Disengage

'What?' Fraw somehow didn't hear what was said and was confused by the order at the same time.

Rotation order to third base.

Rebels are launching an assault on the Eastern border.

'What? Do they have a Chassis?'

Irrelevant.

'There's still people on this edge of the city.'

Target priority has changed.

Evacuation in progress.

Train lines intact.

Ground forces en route to continue assault.

'But they can't—'

Target priority has changed.

The Angilassus curled into itself, pawing at its wound.

2.

Fraw righted her Chassis and began making her way towards third base, racing along the edge of the sprawl, a dead highway. The city was asleep. In a kingdom of needles even the hay can frighten you. Fraw's foot cast a long shadow as she passed in front of the blinking headlights of a rubber scorched car, one door left open. The sun was going down. Looking deep into the crystal tower blocks, Fraw saw some people. They were perched on the rooftop. One person's legs dangled over the edge, another, headphones over their ears, pointed a microphone into the sky. Somebody else was attempting to juggle. She could never know why they were there, what they wanted to see. But she was a romantic.

Blue line magrail clear.

Equipment inbound.

Third base was a complex. The white buildings seemed to grow diagonally, catching the light and casting deep shadows across the land, like forty sundials telling every time at once. A greenbelt lined the east side, climbing up into the hills. The Ministry of the Interior had touted it as a complete carbon offset to the structure. But it would take 90 years to sequester the amount of carbon to cover its development, let alone its operational costs. That was without the fact that the aggressive cultivation of a singular pine species meant the ecosystem was weak and prone to sickness. From the head of her Chassis, looking down at third base, amongst the dead leaves and bramble and white and black, Fraw couldn't see the ground.

'What do you want me do here?' Barked Fraw.

The train landed at the waist of Fraw's Chassis. The line wasn't intended for personnel so the only way to get up or down was a single spiral staircase. It was a wiry black shell that ran up for metres. Fraw had climbed it herself once, stopping most of the way up and chewing a pear as she watched the view through the railing.

There's a rifle in carriage 2 loaded with non-lethal rounds.

Engage the enemy and suppress the attack.

Fraw picked up the rifle. There were some people at the perimeter, a few bricks, some fires, but

mostly they were walking forward together.

‘This is a Chassis gun.’

Well a regular one would look silly.

‘I can’t fire this at people.’

They’re non-lethal rounds.

They’re terrorists.

‘They don’t know what they’re doing. They’re out in the open. They’re not a threat.’

If they make it to the city there’s no telling how much damage they could cause. How many civilians could get killed.

‘There’s easier ways into the city than through a functioning base.’

The crack of gunfire sounded from the trees. They were moving out of cover and into the shadows.

We have to finish this quickly, Fraw.

‘I won’t do it.’

3.

Fraw had given her whole body. That’s why she had become a pilot. Not because she was told or because she thought that was what you were supposed to do. But to cede control, to belong to, and to help. To sing what she knew was there through her new flesh. And yes, she wanted to be beautiful. In the way a shiver can be when it’s not yours.

Now she couldn’t do anything. She clenched her fist and pulled into herself but there was only the shock of a stuck door. The Chassis began to raise its gun. The sounds of scraping metal surrounded her. Gears turning, rails extending, and pistons locking. Once they were her breath. The gun locked against Fraw’s shoulder, as she looked directly into the crowd. The bullet ripped the arm of a man’s body, blood spattering into the faces behind him.

‘What the fuck.’ The sounds screeched out of her before she had the chance to assign meaning.

Fraw jammed her heel into the edge of the array, over and over.

Aural link severed. Network communications severed. Global point to point stabilisation failure. Remote access failure.

The Chassis collapsed, dropping to its knees, the back of its hand folding up in an attempt to slow the head’s impact with the ground. The people had scattered as soon as the Chassis fired. Fraw felt cold but her skin was wet. She breathed hard through her mouth, her head parallel to the ground. The horizon scattered ribbons of ripe stone fruit into the sky but she didn’t see it, she just looked. The Angilassus tackled the slumped Chassis. Its momentum threw it directly into Third base, snapping the buildings as it crashed through. Fraw watched the people, before they had scattered, now they were running. She swivelled upright, her Chassis rising like a spun coin. She could hold her own weight. She pointed her rifle at the Angilassus, its halo spotlighting it amongst the shadows.

Network Link Patched.

Fraw, you have to listen to me-

Fraw thrust her heel into the array. The Chassis fell again.

A chorus emanated from the Angilassus. Dissonance resolving into harmony and back again. It drew up to its halo which now shone flat from every angle. Fraw reached for her knife. The Angilassus lurched forward as a needle, nearly the size of a Chassis, pierced it and fastened it to the ground. Blood climbed up the thread protruding from its back, like a time-lapsed malignant weed sprouting aching viscera. The needle had come from the sky. The Angilassus began to scream again. A second needle came, and a third, each dragging the Angilassus down. It strained for the sky, new limbs unfolding and pushing against the ground. The screams grew louder. Fraw staggered towards the perimeter, a few people were there to watch. She dropped the Chassis in front of them. She didn’t really think it would do anything.

Fraw shut her eyes and pulled her hands to her ears.

Fraw shut her eyes and pulled her hands to her ears.

Fraw shut her eyes and pulled her hands to her ears.

The sky was clear like after a storm. The moon hung close, poised to fall at any moment, but the knot held tight. The Angilassus was gone but the needles remained. The congealed strings were snipped and floating to the ground. Fraw stood her Chassis up. The ground was churning. She crawled back past the perimeter until she felt solid earth.

Pools of red seeped up to the surface, boiling and fading. Fraw thought she saw hands, not grasping and clawing but still, bathing. Something started rising from the centre of Third base. Bare steel mesh and cracked concrete pushed through. It was a building. Charred and blasted. It continued rising, ripping apart everything in its way. It halted crooked like a sapling in shadow, at least fourteen storeys tall.

Structures started sprouting everywhere. A market stall, delicately stitched fabrics slipping of golden rails. A thin box of shelves, books stuffed into every space. A brick oven surrounded by upturned plastic chairs. The trees also gave way, foundations tearing the new roots.

Fraw saw an old man stumbling through the forest. His left leg followed the other like a malnourished puppy. He came to roofless room. There was a selection of plastic dinosaurs scattered on the desk and a stack of papers swirled in crayon. Posters faded beyond recognition, a box of shoes. The old man got to the bed and collapsed there.

The red formed a lake across what was Third base. Petrol colour vapour spit into the air as the boiling intensified. The structures began crumbling and dropping to the ground. A block of flats fell into the highway at the edge of the city. The ashes dissolved everything it touched. The lake kept sinking. It was a well but nobody could say how deep.

Network link patched

Fraw you've been up too long. We don't know what will happen to the Chassis under this strain.

Fraw walked the Chassis along the highway. The magrails had resumed service, slaloming through the architecture. A child yawned as they crossed the road towards their school. A girl bent her foot behind her, resting her back against a shop window. The mannequins watched intently, one judging the dirt of her shoe, as she thumbed over her phone and smoked a cigarette. A man lay on the sidewalk, head on concrete, strumming a guitar. Fraw returned to the launch site. She felt ill.

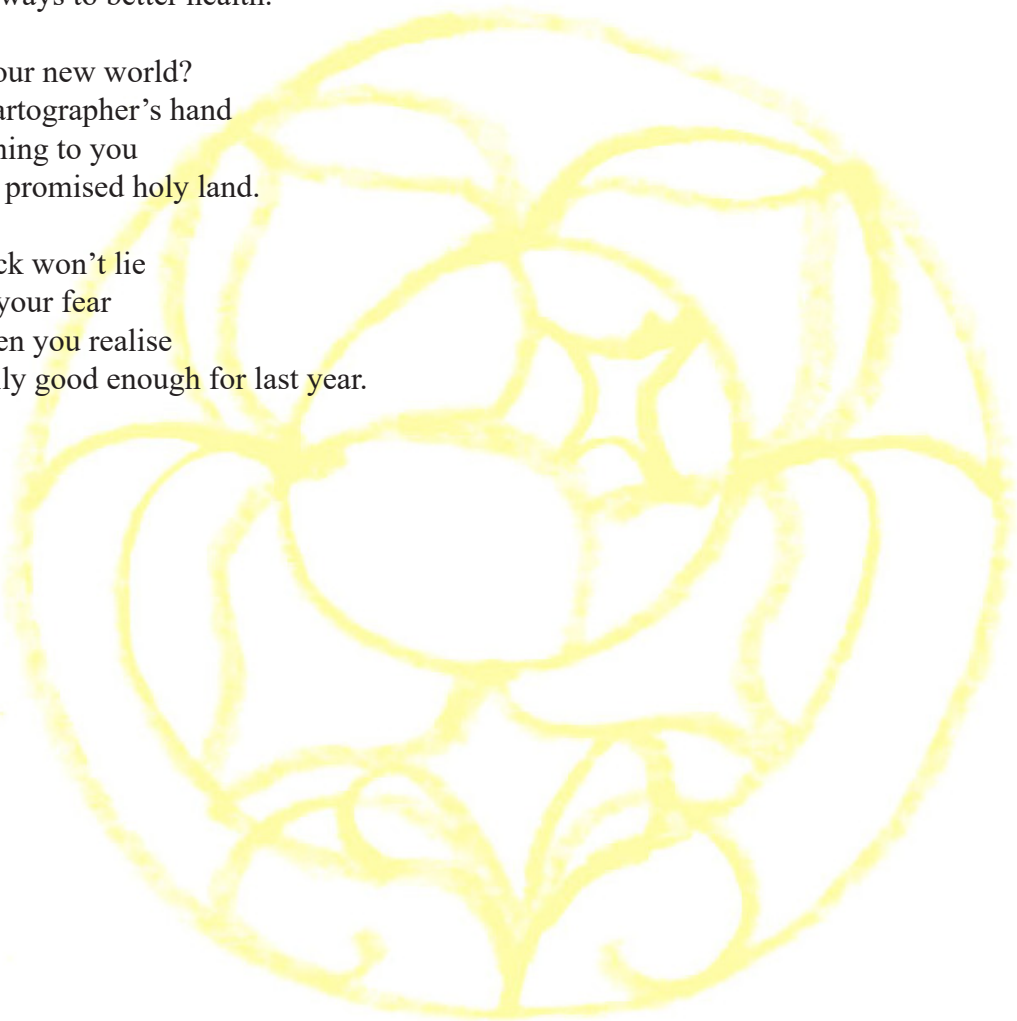
Rose

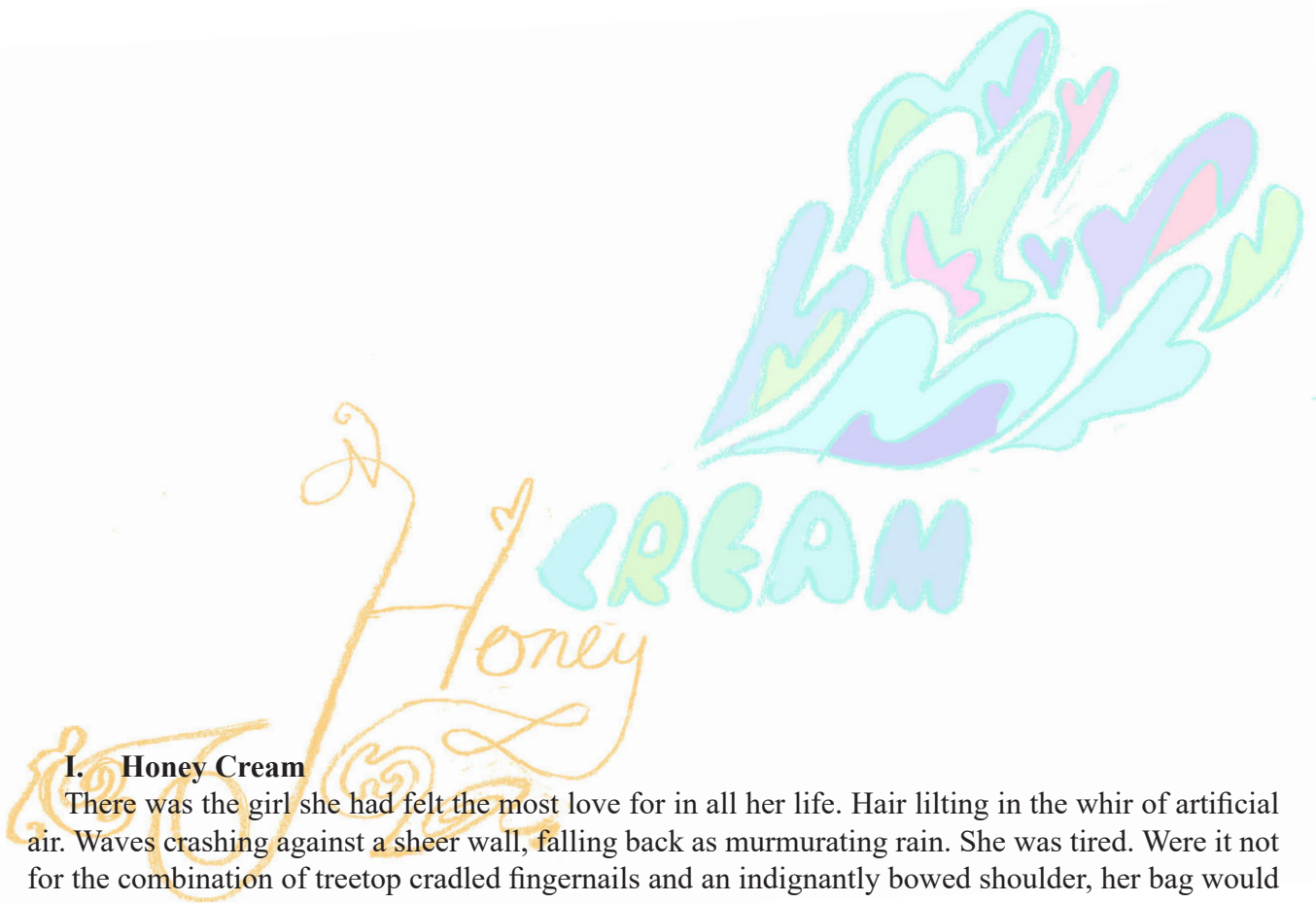
If only to wander those endless hallways
like you did once before
in the half-light of that place
past the rose hung doors.

It's harder to be forgotten now
or at least to forget yourself
so drag that cigarette alone
and toast always to better health.

Where is your new world?
beyond a cartographer's hand
Zion is nothing to you
There is no promised holy land.

But the clock won't lie
after all of your fear
breathe when you realise
you're finally good enough for last year.





I. Honey Cream

There was the girl she had felt the most love for in all her life. Hair lilted in the whirl of artificial air. Waves crashing against a sheer wall, falling back as murmuring rain. She was tired. Were it not for the combination of treetop cradled fingernails and an indignantly bowed shoulder, her bag would be laid flat on cracking concrete. Still, here it rains. Here grass can grow through, but, of course, not absolve. She would likely never see her again. There was an unfortunate centrality to that charm.

Diana massaged the hair on her forearm. She'd never gotten used to her bare arms; more so the embodiment of them than anything else. A taciturn honey-cream shirt pushed out of her father's sleeveless cricket jumper, all tucked neatly in a shaded-rose burgundy skirt. She had used that jumper for its intended purpose a number of times. This morning she flinched when she had looked in the mirror. Like, genuinely recoiled. But mirrors were best viewed at a 45° angle anyway. Truthfully, Diana had a fairly healthy sense of self-loathing, certainly never manifesting in dialogue. In fact, one could easily make the case that it didn't even exist. That could be reassuring.

Dancing Queen into Hit 'Em Up. Sometimes she did appreciate the majesty of her own mind. She had cried, alone in the sound, a few weeks ago. The eye of the universe, A crown of heavy light, angels at the gate, horns in hand. But she'd be fucked if she could recall the reason why now. Say what you want about the rapture (there is no inflection point) at least it produced some good, inert poll-tested liberal reformation.

That was the angle she saw the city, back from the harsh glass of the encroaching settlements. Malignant wailing shards occupied more by creative code interpretations and tax breaks than people. Clawing for the sun, they pull back fire. Reflection, refraction, recursion, somewhere in the sum of those words (a proper one with exponents and substitutions) was the right one. The result was a new eternal flame, burning the heart of the city, spitting ash into the pall. Begging Prometheus to take it away.

Diana stood before the doors of the church. Well, stood, really she walked past three or four times, hoping nobody would notice her, stopping, for what were seconds but felt like minutes, skin flaring red, and contemplating stepping in. Of course she didn't know exactly know what she was looking for, that comes with the territory, but it was three thirty-four on a Tuesday afternoon, quiet contemplation was the immediate option. Still, there was always the chance she wouldn't even make it across the threshold. She felt pathetic, like an anxious child. Last week she did the same thing. Reading Margot's address over and over again, waiting for the perfect imperfect figure that would dispel any notion of paralysis at all. The whole time, she wouldn't accept a glass of water. All you can truly love is the grass.

II. Anointed in Ice

To flats of concrete. Margot's shoulders were hoisted up to her salt sea blue earrings as she leant back on the windowsill. Her hands hooked the alcove as she lifted her left foot off the ground and brushed the bridge of the other. She was propped between some cool apricot althaea and a stack of half-read books. Amongst them a was botanist's handbook, ostensibly created for late 80's housewives, sheathed in a lush illustration of a flowering garden, rendered in a confident gouache. Its measured intricacy meant it shared more blood with Morris than the untamed wilderness which once birthed the gods of old. Margot had never known her mother to have a particularly green thumb. At least as long as she'd been alive.

'Here, I'll pose for you.'

Diana cocked her camera with an automatic if mistakenly arrogant precision. 'I shouldn't have put it away.'

Margot jumped a little at the sight of the flash. 'I'll have to get used to that again.' She saw Diana peering through the viewfinder like a submariner at the periscope. 'Why did you?'

'I don't know, it just got frustrating. I could never tell if I hated the pictures or just myself.'

'It could be both.'

Diana didn't let her finish the sentence, a giggle punctuating her own. 'It's probably both.'

A glittering tsunami poured out of the radio, laboured wind barking through the tracks. Margot popped up and sprouted a smile that nearly covered her eyes. She clasped Diana's wrists, drew her down and pulled her up around her.

She threaded her hand across her back and through the crook of her arm, fingers blossoming before her nose.

She submerged, the blades of her shoulders fastened to the roof of her thigh, her curled fingers capitulating to the first, braced delicately on her ankle.

They fell somnolently, one to the floor, one to the clouds, passing cheek to cheek, their arms locked and immaterial in a spectral prism.

Blushing buds sprouting through aged soil.

Her hair curled around her arms, spiralling in flowing pools, and crawling down her back.

Then Diana remembered she was.

Warm blood blistering into veins of molten rock. She collapsed to the sofa. But Margot was there, three fingers bathed in ice, dragged from forehead, just above the left eyebrow, to cheek, just below the right jaw.

'Listen,' Margot said, 'My sister's finally doing it.'

'No shit, really?'

'Yeah, well she says it'll just be easier for forms and stuff, but they're getting married in Portugal, right near his mum and dad.'

'Wow.'

'They're going to make sure it won't be anything big, so we'll get a good few days with nothing to do. I just was wandering if you wanted to come.'

'Yeah?' Diana scratched at the back corner of her camera.

'Yeah, It'll be fun.' Margot nearly lost her eyes again.

'I really don't know if I'll have time.'

'I haven't told you when it is yet.'

'But it'll be soonish? Like this year?'

'Yeah, it'll be this year.'

'I just... I really have to do something. I'm so sorry, Margot, it's really got nothing to do with you. But if I don't do something now, I'm going to be stuck, and I don't even know if that's really that bad

but—’

‘It’s okay, I’m not cross.’ And she wasn’t angry, she really wasn’t angry, but the words still meant more than their definition. ‘I know who you are.’

III. No Deer

Diana shifted into first gear, released to handbrake, and lifted of the clutch. ‘So you know the way, Khâleh Agatha?’

‘Do you have a A to Z?’ Agatha replied.

‘Uh, I don’t really... Yeah it should be in the glovebox.’

Diana couldn’t work out how her mother had become friends with this lady, probably some innate charm from the motherland, though her father was always good at this sort of thing too, and it certainly had passed down to her, but anyway, here she was, going to pick up a used desk.

Agatha took the book and ruffled through the pages like a fan. ‘It’s hot out isn’t it.’

‘Yeah, it’s nice. You can open the window if you want.’ She leant over and turned the winder a little. ‘Like that.’

Agatha was dressed head to toe like she had just stepped out of the 1970s, a rice paper thin shawl and bulbous black sunglasses completed the look. It wasn’t in some vain grab for the halcyon days of her youth, in truth the period would had been outside a liberal parameters for the definition of ‘youth’ let alone ‘halcyon,’ but she had truly adored the clothes, and you really stop growing after a while.

‘So you work down at the council?’ said Agatha.

‘Yeah, I work at the civic centre. Assistant in the department of City Enviroment.’

‘Do you enjoy it?’

Diana closed the car door. They were in a little parking area off the road. The tarmac, with no reinforcements in sight, was fighting a losing battle against the allied armies of moss and weed. Whether subterfuge or treachery, the green had made crippling inroads into the highest seats of power. A panting greyhound jumped down from the only other car boot in the vicinity, the owner latching a leash to its collar.

‘It’s alright,’ replied Diana, ‘quite boring really.’

‘Right.’

‘There’s nothing more important to people than when the bins are collected. Which I can’t really decide whether that’s good or bad.’

The sun streamed through the trees. Wooden posts lined the left side of the dirt path they were walking along. One post was on the floor. Some delicate twigs. had just about managed to tangle themselves in it before the fall. The sun caught them before they themselves had dropped, twirling back up into their own support.

‘Do you know where we’re going?’ Diana tried so hard to avoid hostility and condescension she really didn’t know where she ended up.

‘Yes.’ Agatha moved on before Diana could get a read on that reaction. ‘There’s deer around here you know.’

‘Really? Do you think we’ll see any?’

‘No, I suspect not.’

A crystal clear stream bisected their path. Diana slipped out her shoes and socks and planted herself firmly in the water. It ran cool over her feet. Ribbons of white shimmered on the surface. Swirls of light rose and fainted along the bark. She raised her hands and Agatha held on to her forearms as she stepped over.

‘Thank you.’

They were out in the open, in a meadow of sorts. There were flowers all around them, parting at their waists. (Agatha more than Diana) By themselves the miniature jewels of faded colour courted no grace, they were roses by no names, but together, spread out before them like that, there was something beautiful.

‘Khâleh Agatha, when...’

‘Ah, here we are.’

They came to a small house, though it did have its own verandah, with a woman outside the open front door, staring up, with her hands cupped over her eyes.

‘You must be here for the vanity,’ said the woman.

‘Yes,’ replied Agatha.

‘Give us a second, bloody thing’s stuck.’ The woman went inside and came out carrying a broom. ‘Wouldn’t fit through the door you see.’

‘Oh, that’s alright.’

‘You ready?’ A muffled yeah eked past the curtains swaying in the second floor double window. The woman took the end of the broom and prodded up at the vanity, suspended in the branches of a tree. She knocked it loose, a few errant leaves with it, and the rope that shot out the window started moving, lowering it to the ground.

Agatha looked it over for any unexpected blemishes or scratches, it was immaculate, and handed over the money to the woman.

‘Have a nice day.’

‘How are we going to carry this all the way back?’ Asked Diana.

‘The cars right there.’ Agatha gestured to the car park a few metres behind the house.

‘Oh.’

The greyhound was sleeping on the roof of its car, the owner was sat cross legged next to them, looking up into the stars. Diana had had to make do fractured lights through park trees. They were pretty in their own way, but here was the real thing, so much wider than her outstretched arms.

‘That was nice,’ said Agatha

‘Yeah, it’s nice to get out,’ replied Diana.

‘Still, you know what they say,’ (she didn’t) ‘They’ve got coca-cola everywhere.’

Written & Composed by Nikhil Patel



Lily & Co
Lily &
Loring are
a simple pearl
a caroline spirit

green for
Victorian Era
Class & Reg

White sh
stiff bo
Navy / Bla

Green M

Shades skin
stick Yac
Bridges

Thank you for reading!