

MUSE
Magazine for UNTL Students of English

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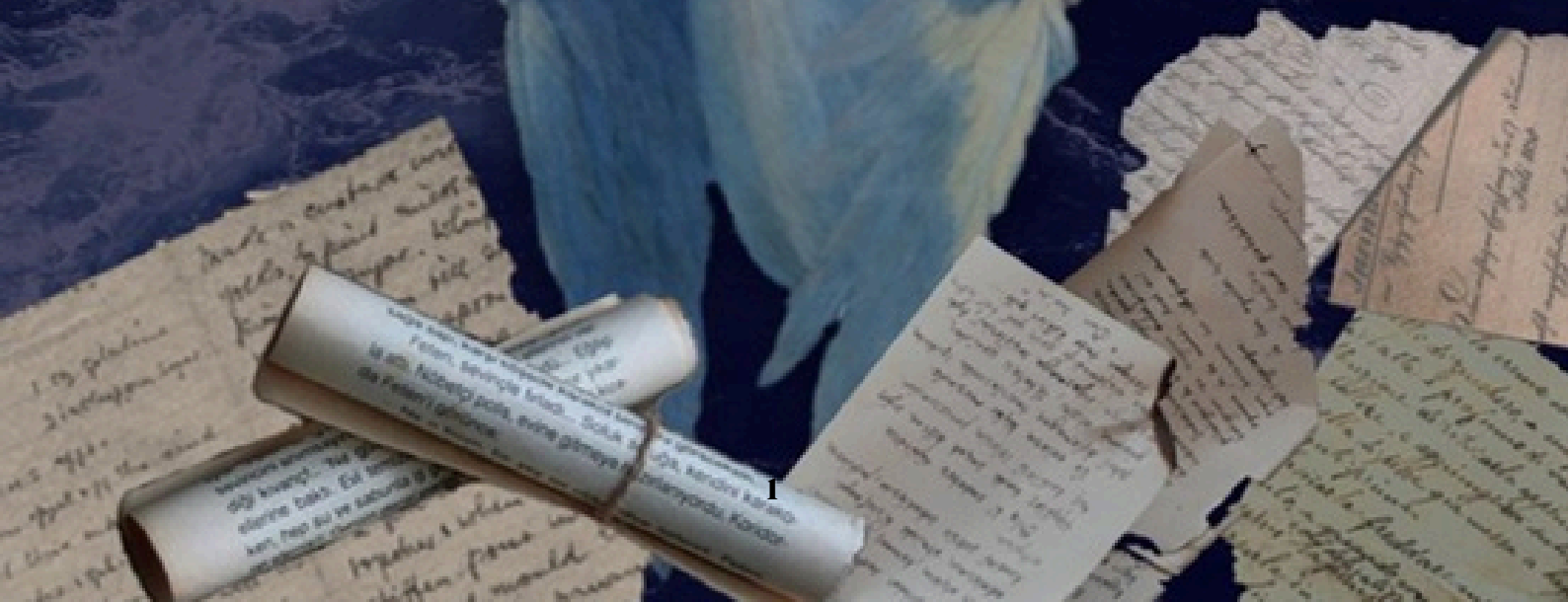


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FOREWORD

Dear readers,

It's been a heck of a semester.

With almost a month of organising or helping the strike movement, our education and future as academics feels at the least a little brighter; but with assignments and exams, taking time to read, write, or settle down to chat can become quite a challenge.

In a time where AI threatens every form of art, it's nice to turn back to what we are capable of creating, and we were overjoyed to see how many submissions we received this semester !

It is with this in mind that we present to you the **20th edition of MUSE**, for you to read at home, at work, or in your favourite coffee shop !

Take a break, sit down with some friends around a cup of tea, coffee, or hot cocoa and enjoy the wonderful work of your fellow students.

This issue will make you see the colour blue differently with our opening chapter : the writing competition, a wonderful display of our English section's creativity. We'd like to take a moment to thank the jury for reading all the beautiful texts and giving us detailed feedback, and let's not forget *Books Books Books* and their generous competition prizes !

Once you've read the poems and prose of all the authors, why not test your literature knowledge with our quote game, or grab a blanket and get to know the latest star of our MUSE interviews : Kevin Curran and his passion for Shakespeare... and curry ?

Finally, if you've finished reading the magazine and are at loss on what to read next, check out our book recommendations for the winter !

Our MUSE team is, as always, incredibly grateful for every author's contribution.

We wish you all the luck in the world for your exams -you've got this !!- and a relaxing holiday after that.

Lots of love,

Aglaée and Charlotte, editors in chief

WRITING COMPETITION

This semester's writing competition revolved around the theme "Blue". Our jury was made up of two UNIL professors, Rachel Falconer and Philip Lindholm, three of our own editors, as well as a *Books Books Books* representative, Rachel Bender.

All the members of the jury have our deepest thanks for the time and effort they put into their hard work !

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Douglas Kennedy was unfortunately not able to be part of our jury this semester. We apologise to anyone who submitted a text hoping to be read by him and who might be disappointed due to this.

The prizes of the contest are gifted to us by our generous sponsor, ***Books Books Books***, everybody's favourite English bookstore in Lausanne ! *Books Books Books* is generously giving out three gift vouchers for their store to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd places of the contest !

This year, our winners are... (drum roll please)

1st place : *Look Away*

2nd place : *May Blue Rest in Peace*

3rd place : *The Woman in Blue*

Congratulations !!!

Thank you to everyone who sent us a text, we loved reading and editing your wonderful work ! We hope to see you all again next semester for our next writing competition !

Look Away

It started with blue.

It's what you should have said.

It's what you think to yourself as their cobalt jackets head towards the door.

"Thank you for your time, Ma'am."

You nod, smiling. How can anyone smile in such a situation?

Your mind is torn between the picture of perfect politeness and the drained expression of distress, none of it feels right; both seem like stepping into guilt.

"Please contact us should you remember anything."

God knows remembering is the last thing you want to do. And regardless, your thoughts are bare, drowned under the image of his face.

They don't seem disdainful, but the knowledge hangs over your head, so unbearably present you can't help but wonder how they don't see it.

"I didn't know."

"No one could have guessed."

Your answers circle back like a bitter aftertaste.

"How could anyone have guessed? He wouldn't speak."

"He had just moved in. Yes, right in front of the school."

"Shyness—such a natural trait for newcomers."

Their uniforms disappear in the car, draining out the only touch of pigment in this bland urban winter landscape.

But you'd settle for the grey of the concrete, for the dull sky that seems to have forgotten it was ever capable of colour. You'd settle for a world of black and white over the image of his face—chilled and pale. Blue like a corpse, they say, but he wore that colour long before that.

And it's everywhere. Growing, covering, drowning. Blue—

On his knees, on his wrists, on his neck.

And God, had you had time to see it. His knees, his wrists, his neck. And now you can't look away.

Blue like a corpse, they say, and you shake away the thought.

It was never certain. You were never sure.

How soothing the blur of tragedy is. How comfortable the space of ambiguity when it comes to responsibility.

The car starts and you wait for them to drive away—the same way you did that afternoon.

You concentrate on the engine sound but the memory comes crawling back.

The image of you, driving out of the building's parking lot through the falling leaves of October, snuggled into the coziness of your Toyota's heated chair.

He stood there, shuffling his feet, in front of his house, head low, hands in pockets.

Four hours after class, three steps away from the playground, two steps from his own house—you

wondered what could keep someone so close to both, yet out in that weather. He looked up, you saw each other, and you left, comforting yourself with the disdain one reserves for “those families that don’t supervise their children, the kind who become a constant challenge in class.”

These children who don’t listen, who arrive late and sleep through class.

These children who don’t want to help themselves.

With his reticence in sports, his endless complaints and disappearances during swimming lesson.

Last in the changing room, and last in the alphabet—parent conferences ended with his parent’s absence. You called home, asked your colleagues, and in the end you told yourself that at least it made you finish early.

And then there were those blue pockets under his eyes, as if holding them up, as if his features would fall apart at their disappearance. A testimony to his sleepless nights that translated only into absence in German class.

“Any signs? Had he ever been violent? Disruptive?”

The officer’s voice won’t leave your head.

Violent?

If anything, the opposite—always shrinking from the spotlight, from any sound that might draw attention. Flinching at questions and laughter that wasn’t his.

So you softened your tone.

And for all your faults—you tried. You tried.

And they saw it too—the others, those so eager to comment on the tragedy. They heard the kids, calling him names, a song of mockery they were happy to ignore.

The first day you noticed it, it was on his knee. An open wound edged with that same blue shade. But P.E. does that—children run, they fall, they cry.

You handed him a bandage, to cover it up, to make sure it didn’t get infected. To make sure the other kids weren’t bothered by the blood.

You reacted. Blamed his classmates when recurrence became reason for taunting. Told them to “be nice.” Told him not to listen.

But he looked at you with the eyes of someone who knows you’re the one not listening.

And how long can one hold such a stare?

So when blue covered his thighs, you looked away.

Then it was the marks on his arms and you told him to be careful, to take care of himself.

And when his elbows took the tint, you said “play nice with the others.” Told him not to get in trouble.

You raised your stare as the colour climbed.

You held his hand, turning away from his knees; you pressed his shoulder to console him about his bruised elbows; you patted his hair the morning you noticed a mark on his neck.

The blue covered it all, dreadful tint. And you can still see it now—crawling up his limbs, indigo suffocating away his rare smile and shy confidence. Till there was nothing left.

The wind slams the window behind you as you stand in the doorway, watching them leave. You jump at the sound, and the only thought that comes is how your twitching makes you look guilty.

How could you have helped if no one listened? No one would have listened.

Despite the powerpoints and the conferences, the meetings and the courses. Despite the numbers and percentages—the “average of two children per classroom!” and the communal shock and outrage. The list of rules and plasticized posters with “how to react” hung up in the lunchroom...

Even at the very end, in the face of flagrancy, in the absence of doubt, the rules disappeared and you were left with your own courage.

And somehow, the idea of being wrong felt worse than the regret that might come from having been passive—and right.

The officer peeks her head out, like some sort of final chance. An invitation to resolve your hesitation, a hand to grab before it's all over and you're left with your own choices.

There's an urge to say it all—to cleanse yourself of it. An urge to condemn the guilty, having not managed to save the innocent.

Still, the doubt is there—the doubt of your place.

Whether you're among those you aim to blame. Whether recognizing the measure of the tragedy digs your grave further.

You block away the thought. A child is dead.

What else can count?

How can you be thinking of anything else?

A child is dead—slowly, under your watch.

Blue covering his wrists, bruises covering his neck.

A stamp of abuse, a painfully slow blanket.

And you stand there.

Picturing it all.

Picturing his face.

And you tell yourself God, in the absence of action, take away my sight.

Maybe if you stepped toward them...

But you weren't his father, you tell yourself.

You weren't his mother, not his aunt, not his brother, sister, friend, therapist, doctor, police.

Nothing.

For all it's worth—you know nothing.

You raise a hand; the officer looks up.

You wave goodbye.

– Ags

May Blue Rest in Peace

My father, Jackie, may he rest in peace, was the king. He contained multitudes and was said to have many qualities: the valour of a battle hardened knight, an artistic eye aligned with that of the people, a track record of fabulous artistic commissions offered to his various friends in palaces, having kept the peace since the noble act of his birth and sophisticated taste buds which enjoyed steak and potatoes and knew to despise any dish yellow tea might accompany. But most notably, he lay claim to kindness, so much so that detractors who dared say otherwise were promptly beheaded.

As his eldest daughter, heir to the throne, I was a principal witness to his kindness. In his magnanimity, he ensured that I would never be sad, for as long as he lived. Thus, the day her mother died, my handmaiden faced the same fate as his opposition, for he could not risk her tears inspiring me to weep. He took many such measures, all to ensure that I would bear a smile. The most generous precaution that my father, may he rest in peace, took was to keep my eyes shielded from blue. I was left out of the palace only on days where storm clouds ensured my pupils remained untainted. I was allowed out of my room only once; all the windows on the path I intended to take had been curtained. The navy was disbanded. Blue eyes were not allowed to step through the gate, and any item of blue clothing could warrant a burning at the stake.

When my father, may he rest in peace, died, my orders finally superseded his. Indeed, with the national treasury at my discretion, I had obtained authority over the distribution of favours.

And thus with blue, more obsessed I grew.
And thus began: my great five-year plan
For my first sight of the shade of blight.
The librarian through books on cyan
Would share the might of brushstrokes so bright
Which used by greats seemed ordained by fate.
I read with fright, ekphrasis of night
And read till late pamphlets from the Tate,
Which would expose symbols that arose
In minds of man since with blue we ran.
From paints in prose, I then studied those
Laws of nature, which govern capture
Of light from skies by our own two eyes.
Told the pastor to speak God's colour.

In churches, dyes whose value would rise
Were set for sale, to begin the trail
Which would lead me to the most navy
Man in this tale. Every detail
Was by decree, now for all to see.

I learnt that the blood in my veins is at times considered blue, that in every ray of light there was something blue, that one found blue in sapphires for jewellery lapis lazuli to dye clothes, and I learnt the hex code of every shade of blue. Throughout this undertaking, I at no point dispelled my father's, may he rest in peace, precautions, as I wanted my first time with blue to be perfect.

I did, however, inscribe into law my own measures, so that, once I was ready, I would easily find the perfect guide for my first time. I ordered my subjects to proudly raise all the flags of their identity on the walls of their home: the nations from which they hailed from, the colour of their eyes, their preferred colour, sexual orientation, age, birthday, principal emotion, zodiac sign, social class, and gender identity. All citizens were required to clearly express all of the above in their lives, and any separation between the flags they flew and their person was gently reprimanded.

A dear friend of my father, may he rest in peace, pointed out that certain aspects of the self for which I demanded a flag were too smooth to be neatly contained within a rectangular piece of cloth. I told him that it didn't matter, as I could hire artists to design the missing banners, informing them of the chromatic associations I knew. Blue was always on my mind, the sentences used to describe blue to the blind, the full list of appearances of blue in history, and the detailed scientific measure of the various shades of blue ran in circles in my head. To me, it was obvious which month was the most blue and which was the least. It was abundantly clear that thirty-three was the age to be declared most blue. It was trivial to deduce that whatever blue quality the upper class had was well masked with various frivolities. I considered blue so tirelessly, the wallpaper of my room turned blue, and my skin began to seem so too. But of course, I had never seen blue.

Perhaps my father, may he rest in peace, was right to keep blue away from me. Perhaps he did so not because of blue's reputation, but because somehow, he knew what would happen to my mind when it began to ponder blue. By the end of my five-year plan, I stopped listening to music, I could not eat, and I could not keep any of my clothes on. I craved very specific tunes which I had never heard, an even more specific dish I had never eaten, and a singular outfit which did not have me reflexively writhing at the thought of: an outfit I had never seen or worn.

But I had to hold myself back until my first time. My universe had turned blue, clouding my vision with blue spores, until I saw nothing but the nebulous concept of blue molded to approximately the shape of the world that stood here before this blue fungal growth had stepped out of my blue mind.

It was two weeks after I could not eat anymore that the head of the military came to me, saying they had found a man as blue as could be, who was waiting for me in the dungeons, painted as per my instructions. I ordered the general to bejewel the man of my dreams from head to toe in

sapphire rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and anklets, that he be made up with paint confectioned from lapis lazuli, and that he would have no other artifice. Whilst those preparations were being made, I set a blindfold on my eyes to ensure that, for my first time, I would take it all in at once. I then ordered my servants to clothe me in my commissioned monochromatic blue dress. My personal chef was alerted that the ritual I ordered for my first encounter with blue had begun, and so he started work on the dish, which I would share with my saviour locked in the dungeons: a steak cooked blue with a blue cheese sauce, and a simple blueberry fruit salad for dessert.

A blues tune began playing around my precious mentor-to-be, and that is when I began my descent down the nine flights of stairs that separated me from the cell that kept my saviour. I was guided, if not carried, by my servants the whole time, for I was barely in any state to walk. The conundrum was worsened by my blindfold, which would obviously not come off until my first empirical experience of blue. When I finally arrived in the cell, the servants closed the door behind me, at which point the promised moment was upon me.

I opened my eyes, and there Ida Klein stood in front of me, essentially naked, barring the ornaments that decorated him, and the perfectly uniform walls making it so that I was locked in an endless void with the perfect man. Ida was an upper-lower class (#005A92) Aquarius (#002D62) thirty-three (#1338BE) years old, specifically born on the 22nd of January 3201 (#436B95), clinically depressed (#004792) Swedish (#006AA) trans (#5BCEFA) man, who had dalliances with men and women (#0038A8) by virtue of his (#528C9E) eyes and who purported, without giving reason to believe the contrary, that his favourite colour was (#2832C2).

Ida died later that night. Perhaps father was right, and (#0000FF) is the root of despair. May Blue Rest in Peace...

- D.V. Chromatic Reptile

The Woman in Blue

She wore pale blue through shadowed years,
A shade that shimmered close to tears.
Soft as surrender, calm as ache,
A colour worn for silence's sake.

The sky was blue, but held no light,
A whisper trapped between the night.
It matched her pulse, it matched her breath,
A quiet hymn to living death.

Each thread was woven out of care,
A gentleness too hard to wear.
It caught the words she could not say,
And turned her brightness dull and gray.

Her lover said, "Blue suits you well."
A charm, a cage, a subtle spell.
So she obeyed, as captives do,
And wrapped herself in that pale blue.

Her laughter dulled to porcelain sound,
Her eyes looked down, her wrists were bound.
The blue became her second skin,
A soft disguise for the pain within.

Yet deep beneath that faded tone,
The green of growth had slowly grown.
A seed of self, a secret vine,
A promise grew and dared to shine.

he dreamed of forests, rain-wet leaves,
Of open air her mind believed.
Of moss and meadow, unconfined —
A colour fierce, yet still kind.

The night she left, her hands were bare,
No lace, no blue, no ribboned snare.
She dressed in green, the shade of will,
Of life that trembles, yet is still.

It was not loud, but calm, and true,
A promise soft, like morning dew.
No longer glass, no longer small,
She wore the colour that said — *I'll fall,*
But I will rise, and root, and mend,
And never wear your pale again.

Now when she walks through fields of rain,
She hums a song of loss and gain.
For blue was the wound beneath her calm,
And green the spark that healed the harm.

Blue was the cage she once outgrew,
Green is the place she is walking through.

– G.D.

All that Remains

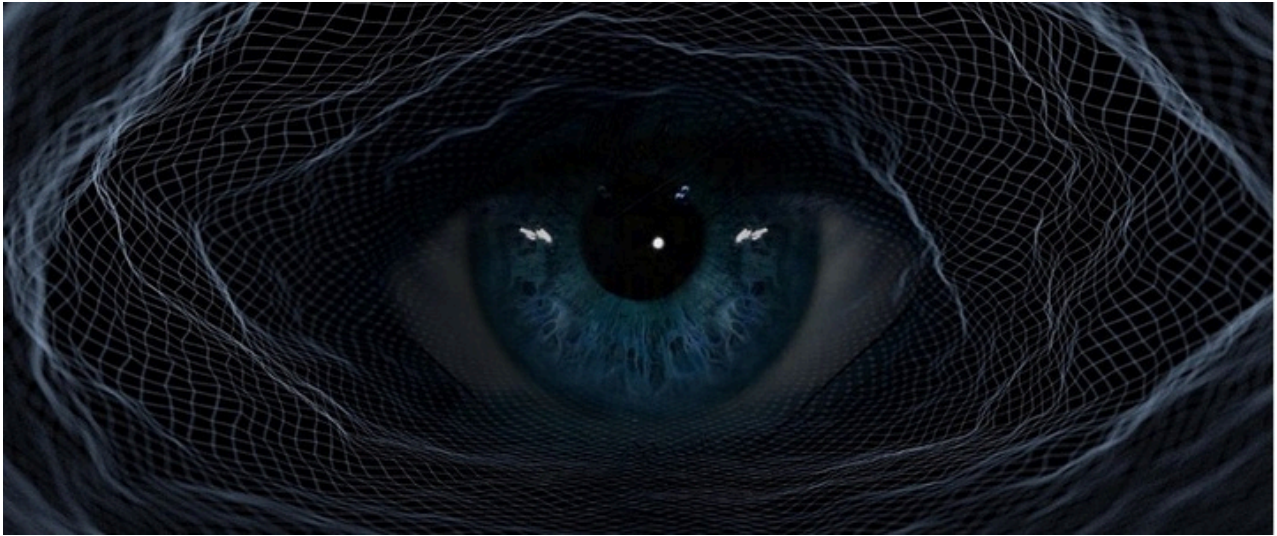


Image from Pixabay by @Placidplace

A flash before my eyes.

A hand upon mine.

And it all vanished in an instant.

All but those eyes.

I spent an eternity chasing fragments of a fading picture.
I didn't want to forget, for forgetting means giving up.
But destiny is cruel.

And the memory of him was already slipping from my mind, as I had slipped away from his heart.

I couldn't give up, couldn't let myself forget, because despite everything, something always came back.

His eyes.

As blue as the sky, as soft as a gentle river, and as deep as the ocean.

His voice must have been the gentlest, the taste of his lips the sweetest and his touch the softest. Or was it?

But the blue of his eyes was still the most captivating.
I would get lost for hours, searching for warmth as I swam through the cold waters of his gaze.

They had seen me laugh at a joke long since forgotten.
They had seen me cry.

They had watched me fall in love with him and then had stared at me coldly as I begged him to stay.

I had seen them in broad daylight, where their colour shifted to grey.

I had seen them in darkness, where only the glow of passion made them warm.

But never once had I seen the waters overflowing those piercing navy diamonds, nor spilling on his cheeks—cheeks I can no longer remember.

They could turn darker than the angry sea, brighter than lightning tearing through a stormy sky.

And yet, to me, they were still the most exquisite sight to exist.

Even when they seemed colder than a lost iceberg at sea, I would gladly stay, frozen in place, before those majestic blue depths.

I wished to venture into this deadly sea, into this raging sky, again and again.

Damn it all.

I wished to drown in the deep waters of his gaze, to burn my wings toward the sun hidden somewhere in the endless sky of his pupils.

Those eyes were carved into the very walls of my mind.

Another flash before my eyes.

And the blue was all that remained of him.

All that remains of me.

– **Mathile Saja**

Bird

See
Caribbean blue.
Breathe
Float
Drift.
Feel the breeze
Along your wings.
Wind
Carries you
Higher
Towards the infinite expanse of
Caribbean blue.
Above and below
Is nothing more
Than an endless
Land of freedom.
In a gentle caress
The sun plays
Shining on the pure
White
Soft
Feathers
Of a carefree bird.
Roam
Without chains
Without restraints
In the boundless
Caribbean blue.



Image from Pixabay by @Miss_venture

Ft. *Caribbean Blue* (2009 Remaster) by Enya
From the album *Shepherd Moons*

– Viviane Bossi

Black Eye, Blue Iris

Waltzing out of the womb:
A bruise to lose yourself into.
We children mark our way into the world-
Blue planet, made bluer
By the maw of machinery.
Yet, the water covers the bruise,
And soon it will cover all.

Wee child feels sorry,
But he keeps hitting.
There is no why-
It's just the way it is.

Wee child hits his brothers and sisters,
He runs around screaming in fear
“I have to keep hitting, or I lose.”
The Mother looks upon him with despair;
Paralysed, she prays and looks away
But she only sees bruises all around,
Bruises everywhere-
They eat the blue of heaven,
They war the way of nature,
Breaking our every backbone.

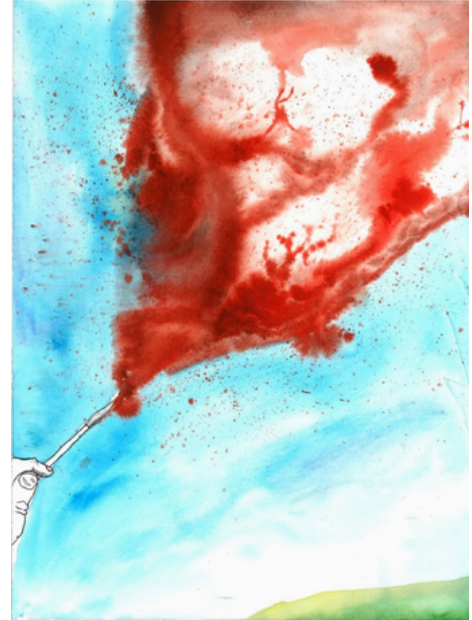


Image © Manuel Ferrazzo

– Manuel Ferrazzo

BLUE

Blue is the colour of my tongue, my tongue which repeatedly swirls to swallow the excessive wetness of my mouth, my mouth which wants to cry as do my eyes, my eyes which see the train departing with her inside. Blue is the feeling of air swooshing through my fingers as I wave her farewell on the last train of her time, that train which whistles deep into my ears, the final notes of our story, the final notes of her story which feels like the end of my story too. The wind is cold, and the insides of my body have begun to freeze from standing there too long. I remain still, paralysed by the blue feeling in which I am drowning; if I stand here long enough, maybe they will carry on living and forget me in my darkness? The taste of blood streaming from my tongue which I bite to prevent myself from calling after her submerges my mouth, submerges my thoughts, submerges the last bit of hope I had left. I feel blue has become me.

The sun has gone down, or maybe is it my eyes which have closed; I finally breathe again. The late season air has hardened into shards, scraping at my tongue. I feel I will never speak again. Do farewells hurt this much, are all of you familiar with the wounds of seeing a part of yourself leave? It would have been easier if I had been the one stepping onto that train, entering that soundproofed wagon, shielded from the world in motion by imperishable glass. It would have been less painful to sit with my back turned, waiting for the machine of fatality to take me away, looking outside no more, ignoring this life which keeps advancing. I would not have heard the cry of the departure, screaming at me as sharply as a wounding knife, I would not have felt the wind of the acceleration on my face. Yet she has left, and with her the joy of light days. Nights together seemed never-ending, her and I escaping the violence of the outside into an infinite sea of bliss; now every night feels like diving into the depths of a blue, blue ocean. The spiral of the night knows no death; the waves of blue whirls that are my thoughts reach no calming bay.

Only by laying it on paper can I sometimes force the blue out of my mind; by marking the whiteness of the page, I make my inner world real. The feeling of darkness engulfing my body runs down my veins through my hands, into words made from botchy blue ink. Still my thoughts never stop spiralling, they have trapped me into undying obsession. Only now the blue has seeped too deeply through my skin, under my nails, into my bones. My blood has changed colour, my fingers have hardened; sentences freeze, words get lost

until

every

last

one

becomes

BLUE.

– Lucie Benton

Blue. a Deep Ocean Blue



Image from Pixabay by @vampy24

My favorite color is red. Not a bright stop signs red. The cherry red. A deep red. The one of the morello cherries in my grandma's garden. The one of the leather couches in my dad's living room. A vivid, intense, and comforting red. The one of the blood running through my veins, full of life. I've always thought this question of "what's your favorite color?" was a stupid one. As if a color could tell you everything about someone. "You like green best? Oh, me too, what a coincidence!" And then? Blank. An abyssal and awkward void. A deafening silence. The worst way to know someone. As if one color was the equivalent of ten years of friendship... I love a deep, morello cherry red, and so? What does it say about me ?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

But I could tell that I enjoy the edge of the day, when the last ray of sun fights against the horizon. I hate people who speak too loud on the bus, because I like the sound of the road. I could spend my entire life eating my grandma's zucchini flower fritters. My favorite music is ABBA because it makes me want to dance so much that I cannot resist it. I want to be a teacher because nothing makes me happier than seeing kids discover the world. The pride you see in their eyes when they achieve the most insignificant little thing has no price. I do not enjoy the rain, but I love the smell of the grass after it. At my grandma's I walk barefoot every morning in the garden to feel the dew on my skin.

What does it say about me ? Almost everything.

Oh, no, I forgot. I hate dating.

Hate might be too strong, but if I can choose, I would stick to friendship and family. How are you supposed to know someone well enough to want to build something with them? Friendship is safe. You are there for your friends; they are for you. They become your family, the one you have

chosen. A smile is enough to understand each other. Family is safe too. They are here; they will always be. Family is infinite, inseparable. Linked by my dearest, cherished deep red. The one full of life. The endless flow of life within your heart.

Endless, but not eternal.

Because Dad called me this morning. Because this endless flow has fallen asleep. Because Grandma is gone. She was laughing yesterday; her voice has been silenced today. She was cooking yesterday; the dishes are still waiting in the sink. The ocean blue of her eyes is covered in a snow-cold sleep. She will never lie them on me ever again.

The river on my cheek is unrestrained, the hole in my chest deepening with each breath. On Thursday my joy is buried with her, and as my body lives, my soul wanders. I become the spectator of my own life, but the most cherished character is gone. She was the center of the show, and without her, its sense faded.

Grief.

A largely explained process that only hurts. It crashes, smashes, destroys, and harasses. No matter the explanations, no matter the time. The claw of grief deepens in your flesh, and the only thing you have are your tears. And when there is none left, emptiness moves into your mind. A smile appears again, the mask of melancholy infecting every movement, every breath of every minute of every day.

I am sitting at a bar. My friends went back home a few minutes ago. My glass of wine is looking at me while my smile fades again. A deep, morello cherry red wine. I hate that color. Because there is no more life in her house. Because no one is picking them anymore in her garden.

I almost throw my glass on the ground when he sits next to me.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Are you kidding...”

Her eyes. He’s got the same as her. The bluest ocean deep color of eyes. For a glimpse of time, I thought she was looking at me through him.

“You’re kidding me...” I whisper, tears on the edge of my eyes.

“I thought coming straight to you to tell you that you have the most beautiful smile and the happiest laugh I’ve ever heard was too direct,” he simply answers.

“Nothing is more fake than my smile or my laugh,” I murmur.

“Then I hope to see or hear the real one, one day,” he says softly.

I look at him. I could not describe him.

“So then, what’s your favorite color?” he asks again. “Now that you know why I asked you this.”

I look at his eyes. Again. For too long. He notices. He says nothing.

“It used to be red. Morello cherry red.”

“Used to be ?”

“Yes...”

For the first time in months, a soft, real smile spreads across my face. “It’s blue now.”

I add. “A deep ocean blue”.

– **Sybille Charbonnier**

Blue Medallion

TW : Addiction, mental health, implied suicidal thoughts

The cold gnawed at her skin through her puffer vest, her face buried in her scarf had already gone numb. How she hated winter. The sky had been gray for days. The sun and its warmth were now a long-gone memory, replaced by the constant wind sending chills running through her body. Sasha had just ended her shift at the garage and walked mechanically back to her flat. It was going to close down. Mr. Allen had told her so. She felt sad for him, he'd worked all his life to maintain it. *I'm gonna need another job.* Without that money, her landlord would happily find a new tenant. One who could afford to pay rent on time. *Fuck.*

She crossed the road. Lying in her narrow apartment, languishing in her bed, waiting to fall asleep. All this had become too much to bear. Her stomach tightened. The last two years had been spent doing everything possible to elude going back to that place.

The bar still adorned that same old worn-out wooden signboard. The bold golden letters on dark green read The Bear's Den. Her heart pounded hard in her head. Her dry eyes failed to weep. *Fuck.* All she could do was stand powerlessly and watch as her hand pushed the door. She stepped in and froze on the spot, overwhelmed by the laughs and loud talks echoing against the walls. She forcibly paced forward, her body drawn to the counter, her eyes looking in every direction. Beers. Cocktails. The destination reached, she stood waiting for the bartender to come over. She closed her eyes, fighting the urge. She just wanted to leave.

She reached for the medallion inside her pocket. She struggled to catch her breath, her eyes fixated on the coin. *Two years.* She closed her fist, pressing that stupid coin inside her palm. *Fuck.* She raised her head and made a sign that caught the bartender's attention.

A hand grasped her shoulder. She turned around in recoil. *Olwen.*

'Hey, how long has it been?' asked her friend. 'A year?'

'Yeah, something like that.' It wasn't the right time. The bartender was looking at her. She opened her mouth to speak.

'A Virgin Mojito and a Long Island Iced Tea, please.' Olwen said before she could talk. 'You're still with Jane, right?' Olwen asked, facing her again.

She gulped. 'No, actually it's been over for a few months.' *Three.* 'But it's been going great.' She said, forcing a smile.

'I'm sorry to hear that, but don't worry. I'm sure you'll find someone else.' Right now, what she wanted was a drink. And not the one the bartender had placed in front of her. Olwen was already sipping hers, while Sasha kept fidgeting the medallion. The whole world blurred. Most of the talking was done by Olwen, punctuated with the succinct answers Sasha gave to her questions.

The conversation turned around Olwen's one-year sojourn in Canada, what she had done there, how much she had missed Sasha, and how exhausted she felt since she had come back two days ago.

Sasha looked at Olwen in the eyes, yet she was incapable of listening to her words. She sipped, her gaze searching through the glasses and bottles around her. The smell aroused memories. Never good ones.

'Are you with me?' Olwen looked worried.

'Yeah, yeah. Of course. It's just so noisy in here.'

'Right.' Her lips tightened. 'But I kinda feel like I'm doing the whole conversation. And I don't want to sound annoyed or anything, but you haven't answered my calls those last six months.' Sasha let out a groan as she pushed herself from the table.

'Come on, don't react like that.'

'Look, I'm tired. Sorry if I have to work all day to pay the rent of a shitty apartment my landlord's gonna evict me from. Not everyone can afford holidays like you.' That came off harsher than wanted.

Olwen's mouth dropped open. 'I guess I must have forgotten how much of a bitch you can be sometimes. *You* know why I went there.'

The pounding in her head swelled, her head was about to explode. She just wanted a drink. She should tell Olwen to leave. *It can only get worse.* 'Okay, I'm sorry. I think I'm on edge and it's got nothing to do with you. Sorry. I really mean it.'

'It's alright. I'm sorry too.' Olwen said, her voice going back to its vibrant delicacy, although a tremble betrayed her resentment. 'I know you've got your problems. You always have, even before I went to Canada. But it seems to have gotten worse since your mother's diagnosis, which I totally understand but you're so closed off, and-

'Oh, fuck off.' Sasha sprang to her feet and started her way to the door. *I'm so sick of myself.* 'Wait!' ordered Olwen in a firm voice. 'You know I have to ask.' Her expression softened. Sasha knew the question that was coming. She didn't think she could bear it. 'Have you been drinking?'

Sasha wanted to answer. She wanted to say no, but the bulge in her throat allowed no words to come out. She shook her head, and stretched her open hand to her friend, showing her the medallion resting on her palm.

Olwen looked at it for a moment. An empathetic smile faded as soon as it appeared on her face. Sadness, nothing but a stranger contorting her features. She slid her fingers inside her shirt and gave her necklace a gentle tug. The mushroom pendant now visibly dangled between the two friends. 'Do you remember it?'

That furtive smile again.

‘You gave it to me before my first therapy session.’ A tear ran down her cheek. ‘I kept it with me in Canada. That year,’ her mouth writhed, ‘there were times when I thought I was out of options.’ She wiped a tear with the back of her hand. ‘But this kept reminding me I was not alone.’ She reached for Sasha’s hands.

Sasha wanted to tell Olwen she was sorry she had not been there for her. To apologize for being such a burden. To tell her she was broken and needed help.

‘That’s my blue medallion.’ Olwen said, forcing a smile through her weeping. ‘You’re not alone.’ Sasha broke down in tears as her friends took her in her arms. ‘I’m here for you.’ Olwen tenderly caressed Sasha’s hair and hushed her sobs.

Her body shook as Sasha buried her face in Olwen’s neck. Cradled in her friend’s arms, the pounding ceased.

– Mathieu de Figueiredo Silveira

Blue Skies

The foggy days we used to know,
Have left, as all things come and go.
The sky became azure and clear,
And mountains dressed themselves in snow,
Winter is quiet around here,
Is it the solitude I fear?
Is it the stillness of the lake,
Its frosted gaze which seems austere?
Cold winds sharpen my mind and make
Me behold Nature in a flake.
Some nights I look up to the skies,
Sapphire stars make my heart ache.
They're a reminder that time flies:
There, in the blueness of the skies,
Each night these tiny dots arise,
But they live only in our eyes.

– Clara Jude

Enough

It's never enough
Nothing I do is ever enough
It's like the ocean's horizon
No matter how far away
How hard we swim
We will never touch that limit
I look out to the sea everyday
I observe its free waves
The salt spraying the air
The blue sky staring at me kindly
Nothing matters
I can't enjoy it
My eyes automatically go back to the horizon
My view is so fixed at the skyline
That what's within my reach is lost
The waves violently come at me
Searching for my recognition
The sky starts raining disappointed at my rudeness
But my eyes betray my heart
They only care about that unattainable line
My body is overwhelmed
with the effects of that choice
The impossibility of moving forward
And the misery of the present
Slam me, over and over again
Until I fall down and find a sapphire
This shining blue light next to me
I hold it and feel safe
Suddenly the clarity of the impossible becomes clear
And all the elements around me welcome me home



Image from Pixabay by ©dimitrisvetsikas1969

– Miranda Althaus

Forget Me Not

It makes me sad, but then I forget
The blue flower chiming in the wind like a bell
With her sisters, rustling in a small corner of the balcony.
The growing iris, now overlooked, sheds blindly
Its petals in a cascade of spring,
As my own spread on the bathroom tiles in waves of
Discord, extinguishing the sun.

The roaring sound rolled over the hill
And drowned us all in a crowd
Of gathered sisters,
Pooling at your feet
Who used to wander
With the mind
Going North,
And East,
And South,
And West,
Now rooted, silently, in darkness visible,
You dream, weaving picture after picture
In ebbs and flows of pillars of smoke,
Of the flowers you grow, from deep underground.

It makes me sad, but then I forget
The only one, blooming when overlooked.

– Anonymous

Grey

TW: suggestion of self-harm

We're all outside, a mass of bodies sitting on concrete steps. Most of us have a fag in our hand, wisps of smoke disappearing into the night. There are a lot of bare legs, small dresses, burn marks, tattoos and high-heeled boots. My own legs are part of these, in their black fishnets. I am wearing a leather skirt, matching with my choker. Every time I speak, I feel the leather tighten around my neck.

In my world, I see everything from the inside.

I am trapped in my body; I experience my environment with every single one of my senses. There is no boundary between my inside world and the outside one. I live as if I don't have skin, as if everybody and anybody can touch my soul. This has its own share of negative consequences: I fear closeness, touch, emotions, pain, and relationships. I have a constant, overwhelming, need to protect myself.

The world I live in isn't colourful. I may think in pictures, in opposition to those who think in words, but these images lack the expected palette of colours.

In *A Wrinkle in Time*, the protagonists arrive on a planet where every being and object is grey and fluffy. The inhabitants of the planet are blind, as if sight was secondary, unnecessary. The humans, earthlings, who arrive are lost in the lack of colour, having little to rely on for information. How can you define or categorise beings who don't care about their visual appearance? How do you interact with beings who prioritize their inner strengths and sense of community above anything else? What world do we live in, where we, as walking and talking animals, rely so much on appearance?

In my world, I struggle with the idea that every person has a world that I can't see. It's so hard to understand that every moving and talking body has a presence, a history, a world they live in. It's too enormous to even think about. I often get lost in my own thoughts.

Actually, I live in my own thoughts: I visualize my conversations, relationships, and thoughts in one big, grey picture. A picture which, more often than not, is juxtaposed on reality. A translucent image which blurs the outline of reality. A pathway through my mind, the edges seeping into the colours of the outside world.

One of my core memories of those first weeks when I was back in therapy, is my psychiatrist lending me a book. It explained how skin is the barrier between the inside and outside world. One large organ which keeps the inside stuff in the body, but it's also what envelops our body. The skin, which suffers from our hate and demands love occasionally, is what protects us.

I never fully grasped this. What do you mean that nobody can see inside my head, my thoughts, my anger, my needs? What do you mean, I am protected, biologically, from the outside world?

My therapist is currently my lifeline. This could seem weird, maybe even a bit over-the-top, but it's true. She is often what keeps me going in a week, she is one of the rare people I *look forward* to seeing again. Someone who doesn't waver in my mind. She doesn't change, all the hatred I can feel for her comes from myself. She is a projection of my own thoughts. That is her role. Or at least, the one I gave her.

Recently, she changed her office. On her desk, a painting of a cherry tree has appeared, sitting in the middle of a plain frame. In the center of the room, between two empty seats, there is a low wooden table. This is her space. Hers.

My space is my bedroom: I decorate it, re-create it, change the walls, add pictures and take down old ones. It moves, changes, is modified to the beat of my life. I love my room.

I've gotten used to dissociating when I am with other people, to speaking without remembering where I started or where I was going. To awakening in strange places with stranger people. Some say this is my wild, cool side. I find it terrifying. It took a long time for me to seek help, to put words to my world. The first person I talked about this to shrugged. It's nothing, he said.

When I finally, after multiple attempts, contacted the therapist who would follow me for the next seven years, I started painting. I wanted a proof of my pain; I wanted to bring her the box of my insecurities. I never did: it's still sitting under my bed, next to my vibrator and lube. On top, a post it that reads: *I got everything ready to show you and realized you still wouldn't understand. Why can't I trust you? Why can I already live the alienation?*

The first paintings I made were in black and white. Grey pictures. It took me a month of intense dialectical behaviour therapy to start painting with colours: yellow, red, orange. The colours of my hatred and my pain. Three colours, but better than none.

My fingers are stained red. I don't know if I've got my period, if my nose is bleeding. Maybe it isn't blood, maybe it's ketchup. Was I eating? I look down, where is my plate? There is a knife. There is blood on the chair. My thighs - stained red. I hate myself. The words resonate in my head: a moth to a flame. I am attracted to destruction. Stuck behind the bars of my mind, I forget I am the person who is living this pain. I forget that my skin is me. Why do I keep attacking myself?

I want the pain out, want to destroy it. Please, seep out of my bones. Let the emotions out. Leave me breathing again.

She is talking, her head slightly tilted. She is asking me how I am doing, hypothesizing about my lack of emotions in her space. Why do I come to therapy if I don't talk? I am afraid.

I've been asking myself this question, time and again: what am I so afraid to lose? And, every time, I come to the same conclusion: everything. I am afraid of losing everything that I know. I fear what comes after... what is after pain? All I know after pain is nothing. Bliss. Is this what we are working towards? She seems kind, when you look at her eyes. But her body language signals to me: she is a predator. I will never share my secrets to her. *Don't spill the beans.*

In her hands, she is holding my latest painting. It deciphers a woman chained to herself, butterflies emerging from her chest. It's strange, and I love it. On the back the words, written in crimson:

A doctor came to tell me

I was sick.

I looked healthy.

It was

Deceiving.

Friends thought of me
When I couldn't think of them.

I couldn't.

My therapist smiled
As she opened her door,
She told me:

Soon, you will be better.

Cured.

Four years later,
And I am still waiting to be free.

It's eerie going through my past. It's true what they say: never keep your love letters from another world. Never keep your letters from your past. It's not a nice place. I am holding a glass of wine in the palm of my hand, the warmth of it slipping down my throat. On the sides there are the stains of my lipstick.

I've got an eyeliner between two fingers, palette of eyeshadow in the other. It's been seven years since the first time I walked into my therapist's office. This morning, we said goodbye. I wasn't scared; I can come back if I need to. I probably won't. The end of a chapter. *Relief.*

I gave her a fresh bouquet of red tulips. She smiled, thanked me. My hand was on the doorknob; a tear rolled down my cheek. We nodded, I turned, I left.

The beat of the music vibrates through me, down my stomach, up my legs, between my thighs. My hair is loose, free of the bands it normally is held into. Tonight, I am going out with some friends. Tonight, this glass of wine is the only drink I will be having.

I say cheers to my reflection, wine glass tinkling the mirror. I wink at the woman staring back at me, her eyes highlighted by blue eyeshadow. Her body is one, she is here, in the moment. She's made it out. She is free. Soon she will be sitting on the patio of a friend's house, the cold biting her legs. Wrapped around her shoulders, the arms of a lover, their hand gently stroking her bare shoulder. Every time she speaks, the leather around her neck will tighten. She will feel like she belongs. Finally.

– **Anonymous**

her eyes were blue

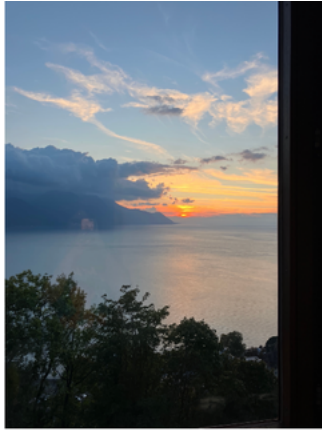


Image © Emma

This summer I fell in love with a girl, her eyes were blue
Her name, deep rooted into my heart, was mine

We shared our mundane life as if there was no tomorrow
Still today came and in the mountains, we met

Our skins sunburned while our tongues tasted
a delicious chocolate mousse. Oh so sweet, the gap in her teeth

I confessed my secret and it resonated in her like the sound of a very
known bell in a sacred church

She smiled, she laughed, she made me almost safe enough to show her
my wrist, my battle scars

(Kissing her was tempting me
I told her so, she wanted too. Unable to do so, we did not)

But yesterday passed by: "I do not want intimacy" with anyone or
with me? "Just not with you "

What is it that made my heart beat a sound;
only something in me understands...

We played monopoly cards, she let me win, my mind blank, my eyes
hazy. The dog barked and barked and barked and goodbye

As soon as you left my vision field, I cried
rivers, lakes, seas and oceans, her eyes were blue
and I never said I love you
to you.

– Emma

I Feel Blue When I Am the Monster



Image from openverse.org by @Zbigphotography

I'm feeling blue when I'm feeling anxious. It's overwhelming. The thoughts in me are screaming. I'm sitting at my desk and I don't know what to do. I think too much, I think. But I can't think. Because if I don't think, I won't phrase it. And if I don't say it, then I can't really feel it. And if I don't feel, everything is okay.

I'm feeling blue when I'm feeling scared. I always fear the repercussions of my actions. What if people start to hate me? I receive a phone call. What if he died? I'm feeling blue because what if what I feel isn't fear but relief? What would they say if I don't speak at the funeral? But I don't want to speak at the funeral. But he's not dead. Phew. The voice on the phone was spam.

I'm feeling blue when I know I'm controlled. When you want to analyse what I do. When you want to check I don't lie. When you want to make sure you're still in my life. You're still important. You're still loved. I receive a message. "Are you in Rome?" it reads. "Why are you not following your classes? Why aren't you here with us if you didn't need to follow your classes?" it means. But I'm not in Rome. And I am following my classes. And that means they talked about me last night. They asked the question. "Why isn't she here if she's somewhere else?" You say "phew" when you're reassured I haven't lied. But I never lie.

I feel blue when you say I'm a monster and you're the target. Because I know that's what you say to the others. "I've been feeling like shit these last two weeks" you tell me. Well, no. You don't say "like shit". You say "not well" maybe. But what about me? But his feelings are more important than mine. All of their feelings are more important than mine. It's always about the group above the individual. Because how can I dare distancing myself from them? Yes, I am the monster. And he's the victim who didn't expect to be defied. He wanted me to comply.

But most of all, I feel blue when I feel angry. Because I can't bear the thought of people thinking less of me. Because I avoid conflict as if it was an STI. Because you always disappoint me. Because I try so much to be considerate and you just talk about yourself and you don't listen. I feel sad because it's more acceptable than being angry. Because being angry has to be against someone. But feeling sad doesn't need to be against anything and your ego won't think it's about you.

I guess I feel blue when I feel blue. Because feeling sad is depressing. But somehow also reassuring. It's almost like I'm addicted to feeling like shit. Like a warm cover you want to go under but as soon as you're there it's suffocating. And as soon as you get back out it's freezing. It's like there's no in-between. I'm always too cold and I'm always too warm. My body hates to be in the middle ground.

I'm feeling blue when I don't know what I'm feeling. Or rather I'm feeling blue when I'm feeling a bit of everything. A bit of all of the above. At the same time. I'm sitting at my desk and I don't know what to do. Do I speak? Do I keep on pretending my smile is not a lie? He will never listen. He will never agree. He doesn't want to lose me, you see. Because he loves me more than anyone in the world. These were his words. Not mine. I don't have words to say what I mean. What I feel. What I want. Maybe it's because it's not words I need. Maybe it's because it's action I must do.

I guess I just feel blue.

- Hopeful

On Truth or What is Left

Made of gold, living in beauteous circles,
Reluctant to reach the shore,
You spill your electrifying yellow,
Enlightening your green creation.
Myriads love your ivy covering the sight.

The sea behind it,
Arduously evident through thousands of shades,
Amid, the deepest blue, we will never comprehend,
Overly limited by our sun carved bodies.

That immensity can be drowning for you,
Having not witnessed the striking waves.
Its existence is too bothering to comprehend.
Oh, the freshly cut green grass is prettier!

Why would you ever want to see blue,
When its reality may never affect you ?

I try to dive,
The blue piercing my own eyes,
Knowing oxygen will fail.
The curse of knowledge you want to avoid.
The various tones, various lightings
But what blue is the bluest ?
Am I also exposing my dawn for choosing the azurest ?

You, deceitful Hathor,
Drowned in your own light, banning true blue,
I fear the future you are creating.
In a poisoned world without oceans,
The belief can only be set on the sun.

– G. SP.

Samantha New York

I think that to finally be at peace I should be at the top of a massive water column. When Moses split the sea, a long line of water disappeared - well the truth is that the two flanks of the way rose up, yes I was here as surprising as it may seem - but I don't care about the truth so I take this line and I put it vertically and it soars high in the sky and me?

I float on my back at the summit and mind you the column is nicely rectangular because it's necessary to stay modern and I float on my back at the far end of it and I spin while I'm floating on my back and I cry because I always liked crying in the water and I cry at the top of my aquatic Tower of Babel and my heavy tears fall down and sink at the bottom of the column. How do I know?

Well I know because I am these tears and I continue to cry and I am in these heavy tears which weigh and drown and I cry still and I sink still I'm dissolving in my tower and my millions of particles take the elevator and we go down. And then?

Then I want to feel the sun. I want to feel it warming me like it warms the water I am a million of water droplets lost in a gigantic water column basking in the sun and we slowly ascend galvanized by the ultraviolet rays because I could not care less about sunburns. And I would be transformed. Because there lies the problem, you see?

Usually I can feel but never enough every sensation amount to nothing there is a beginning but never an end only weariness follows but there everything would change I will be able to eat the sun to devour it in large mouthfuls absorbing it and its rays and after five hours or two my small particles will explode in even more vaporous fragments and I will finally know the outcome of a sensation and I would climb up in the sky and spread myself through the atmosphere and I will see everything love everything without hoping nor waiting because a vapor droplet don't wait for anything except to become rain again and join a wider body of water and so I will be cloud and I will watch over everything and

I would be the gentle blue of the rain and I would be the harsh blue of the summer sky and I would be the dark blue in the abyss and I would be the hopeful blue at the end of the night and I would be the scary blue of the middle of my nights and I would be the mischievous blue of myosotis flowers and I would be the tender blue of my friends' nail polish and I would be the painful blue of the bruises on my legs and I would be the tired blue under my eyes sockets and I would be the luminous blue of a Morpho butterfly and I would be the silvery blue of rock music and I would be the calming blue of a lullaby and I would be the cosmic blue carrying the stars and I would be the Final blues of the

Apocalypse trumpets and I would extend my long misty tentacles around the Earth and I would finally be at peace.

– Valentina Alksnis

Sapphire

Some people are like shooting stars – brightly enlightening our world, for the shortest time – before fading away in the night. We make a wish, the wish to see them again, but they have vanished; we can only hope and find contentment in knowing we got a glimpse of their brilliance, no matter how briefly.

So was the fairy who turned my world blue.

It's like a spell she cast. She took my head into her soft hands, and turned my stormy mind into a sweet, summer sky. Like watercolour spilled on a white page, like an ocean embracing the dry and boring sand. She saw the plain canvas of my life, brought some artistry to the mundane, before leaving in a spark.

I will never forget the day I met her. Clouds cried tears of rain falling on my cheeks raindrops were pouring out of my eyes. October had just started. Leaves were falling from trees like confetti, celebrating the death of the sun. A camaieu of maroon, orange, gold and red had replaced the hopeful green.

Innocence had had its time; now melancholy was taking its turn. It was peaceful.

Dawn had barely risen, mist still unravelling around my feet as I walked on the gravy path leading to the fortress of doom: the dreadful, the feared, the revered temple of knowledge – the one that remains unnamed since the very last trial, shall I say midterms, that left us all breathless.

It once was great, back in the days, when intellectual curiosity and search for meaning was still considered a vital mission. Now it looked like a sanctuary where no one prayed, deserted even by the Gods.

It was a common knowledge that books were written only to be burned. Food for thought did not replace food for dinner, and people were starving. The divine profit-machine was choking on words; reading required a time this modern world forbid itself to allow. Hours spent within pages were hours thrown to waste. They were hours spent within oneself, questioning. Reading was not flamboyant. It was private, silent. Profit Machine was afraid of the quiet. Profit Machine thrived on the noise, so loud that people forgot to lend an ear – and books carried meaning, dangerous, threatening, voicelessly screaming louder than the cacophony. It was enough to trigger Profit Machine's desire to destroy them all.

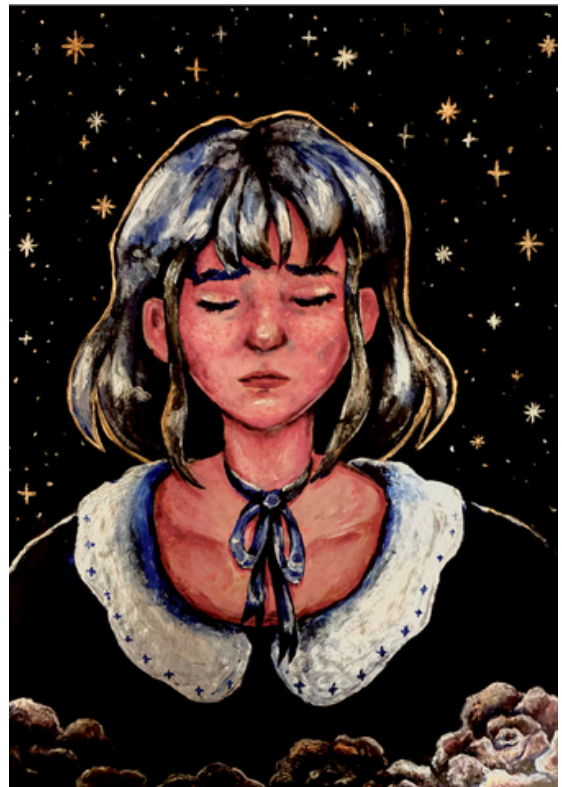


Image © Amélie My-Linh Dauban

University was left to rot, on the brink of decay. Gods with no temple were Gods bound to die; ancient lessons had to perish by the hand of time – forgotten.

Still, a plethora of dusty minds came to the cemetery of mankind's hopes and dreams, daily, on a fixed schedule timed like a clock, like solitary monks of another time. I was one of them.

Though some days, even I forgot why I was here. It was as if the never-ending pressure to perform had managed its way to lodge even within the ones who refused to conform. We had to prove our worth to earn our stay. Little by little, anxiety settled where once sparked passion and wonder. Before I could realise, my world had turned grey.

I had become an empty shell, tackling my daily routine like an automat. It was quite an art to be present physically and absent mentally. To stand though drained of any desire, any longing, any drive to live. Not fully conscious, yet conscious enough to feel the dread. Every moment minutely monitored, thoroughly timed, to maximise productivity.

It was glorious to push oneself to the edge; there was grandeur in sacrifice, magnificence in martyrdom. It is what Profit Machine whispered, and even the ones trying to shut their ears from its siren chants were lured into polluted waters, doomed to drown where no fire could burn.

Yet sometimes I emerged from apathy, just enough only to cry.

It was in one of those moments that I met her. Little did I expect an angel to find me in a deserted chapel, but there she stood. All quiet.

She was beautiful, luminous, unreal, ethereal. Blue all around. I was bewitched.

She was dancing to a melody only she could hear. The cloudy blue silk and tulle fabric of her long skirt was floating around her as she turned, looking as delicate as her cerulean corset embroidered with golden stars. Wavy periwinkle hair was floating around her angelic face like a halo. She had the pale skin of the moonlight blessed, seldom kissed by sunrays. A galaxy of freckles decorated her rosy cheeks; red lips stretched in a mysterious smile. Her eyes, wide open, seemed to devour the world around her.

She startled at the sight of me; our eyes briefly met. They were of the deepest blue I had ever seen.

I smiled, waved, greeted her and asked:

– I never saw you there... Are you new?

Without uttering a word, she nodded, waved back. I cheerfully introduced myself, asked for her name. She gave me a look of panic. Words seemed to collide in her mouth; she stumbled on phrases, gasping for air, drowning in her own sea of letters.

– It's fine, I reassured her. Why don't you write it instead?

Suddenly, I was struck by the realisation that, maybe, she didn't want to talk. What if I had put her in huge discomfort? What if I was bothering her?

– You don't have to, I quickly clarified. If you prefer to be alone...

Her panic intensified; she furiously shook her head before messily searching her huge turquoise tote bag.

– Take your time! I won't leave unless you want me to.

A little calmer, she took a teal sparkling notebook and a marine blue pen and started writing.

I waited besides her with a smile. Class had already started, but I did not care. Magic was happening, here and now. Like in one of those fantasy novels, except I was no mere estranged reader this time. She handed me her notebook. Our hands briefly touched as I took it; her skin was soft. She had fingernails painted in various shades of silver, gold and blue.

Thanks for noticing me, had she written in a delicate, elegant handwriting.

She looked like a fairy... Or maybe she was a fae who wouldn't speak so she wouldn't curse me by accident, as I light-heartedly joked. She giggled at my remark, wrote back an answer, and for hours we talked on the page, sat next to each other under the grey, clouded sky. I didn't notice the dimmed pale light anymore; my eyes were focused on her radiance. Around her I felt the warmth of a blue summer sky.

The following days, we kept on talking in such a manner, quietly sitting next to each other, writing ourselves poems and letters. There was something intriguing about her that I could not quite define; I had never seen anyone quite like her. Maybe it was her eyes full of wonder, maybe it was her careful gestures, her empathy for every living thing, her vivid imagination and marvellous dreams.

She was boldly living, unapologetically existing; bravely loving until extinction, bringing light upon eternity. She looked fragile yet strong, naive yet wise; her spirit had depth I could only fathom. I looked up to her, as she seemed to look up to me in return. She was bringing me light, and I was bringing her strength; she was a spark without fire, I was the wind to ignite the blaze.

I was a blade without purpose, until she became my purpose – showing me colours I hadn't even dreamed of.

She had barged into my life unexpectedly, taking me by surprise, and now I could not ever imagine my life without her.

Yet one day she wrote to me: "I must return to the land where I come from; thanks for making my stay in this world so pleasurable. Please, remember me".

I asked her what she meant, she refused to elaborate. I never saw her again from there; she had disappeared as she came: out of the blue, so much so that I wonder someday if she had ever really existed, if she was only a byproduct of my imagination.

Every day, I try to remember her lessons. Every day, I try to dream big and feel empathy for every living being.

Though sometimes I still think of her, and feel melancholy overtake me, as I get lost in the ocean of memories we share together.

She lit a fire in my heart that burns wild and proud, that will never extinguish. She brought me faith, and warmth, and a new everlasting hope.

Every day, I would wash out the greyness of the sky; every day, I would return and pray in the temple of lost dreams, lost in ancient texts of happier time, every instant with her in mind.

However, I would lie if I said that, ever since she has gone, I wasn't feeling blue, all the time.

- Amélie My-Linh Dauban

the cliché of blue (of you)

Blue.

The colour of your eyes-

No. Too cliché.

How cliché can it be if blue really is
the colour of your eyes ?

Try again.

Blue.

When you say goodbye-

That's just cheesy.

How it is that I pride myself on not being a stereotype
(miserable failure, the circle is complete and I am
a true cliché, one in a thousand)

Yet everything I write about you is cliché ?

Blue.

The sound of your voice

Calming like the waves

Caressing and kissing the shore

Blue.

The way you touch me

Skin on skin

Soft, sensual, silent

(Sometimes rough like the storm)

Blue.

The attraction

Deep, infinite, holder of secrets

Of truths

Blue.

The rattle of emotions

The storm raging inside my head

The waves threaten to pour out

My eyes, my ears, my mouth

Blue.

The lighting

You've struck me many times now

It's the electricity pulsing through you
Through me
To me
Back to you

Blue.
The colour of your shirt
Your glasses
Your shoes
Your eyes, too.

Blue.
Your favourite colour became
Mine
Unconsciously, slowly
Over time.

Blue.
How can I say anything else about it,
when to me,
it's just
You.

- G. M.

The Colour After

Blue.
Endless nights,
Milk-stained sheets,
A clock that doesn't move.

Blue.
I thought I'd feel joy,
But joy feels foreign,
Like a language I forgot.

Blue.
They said I'd glow,
That love would bloom like Spring.
But I am Winter...

My body borrowed,
My mind fogged,
My freedom gone missing,
Folded somewhere between the laundry and the lullabies.

Why so blue?
Because nothing fits,
Because everything hurts,
Because even love feels like drowning sometimes.



Image © Christina Gomes

– Christina Gomes

To the Bluest of Eyes

To the shade in your eyes, I write in vain,
A vow of silence, to the sound of rain.
The world, tainted of you, painted in blue,
It drops, it falls, and always smells of you.

I reach for whispers no one else can hear,
Through dark alleys, I wander, drowned in fear.
I've screamed your name to every God I know,
Hoping this love will last, as seasons flow.

Love is red, bite my lip and see my blood,
It will turn blue, as love that cannot flood.
The sun burns, we hide behind heavy walls.
Night comes, flee! We are as free as the wolves.

Perhaps I'll grasp, I'll come to understand,
I'm sculpted by an artist's shaky hands.

- Tressy



MISCELLANEOUS

Kevin Curran, Unfiltered

Do you have a skincare routine ?

Kevin: I actually do, but it's not very evolved, it involves putting on moisturising cream. But that's all, that's it, that's in the morning, like after my shower. But I couldn't go out without really, I mean, I'd be flaking. So if you ever see me flaking, it's because I was rushed in the morning! It happens every now and then.

Do you have a favourite book and/or favourite books ?

K: Oh, yes! Yes. Okay, so Steinbeck's *East of Eden* is really a big one for me. You should read it, it's incredibly moving, and the very ending is super powerful, it's unbelievable. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is another one I really like. And I'll just throw in one more that's really been important to me for a long time: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is the only novel I've read multiple times. I'm not a multiple-time reader person, you know, usually once I've read something I don't go back. Unless it's things I teach, obviously, Shakespeare's plays I've read many, many times and continue to, but *Ulysses* I go back to again and again. I love the world it creates, it's an endless source of stimulation and imagination.



Kevin Curran, 2025

What's your favourite food ?

K: Well, the short answer is I love spicy food, really spicy. And whatever cuisine has spicy food, I tend to gravitate to. I mean, there's Thai food I love, there's Indian food I love, there's Mexican and Central-American food I love... Yeah, all of these things that use peppers, spicy peppers generously I think are great.

If you could wear anything to work, what would you wear ?

K: I'd love to come in one of those banana costumes, where you're just a banana and your legs are sticking out. But just make no reference to the fact that you're dressed as a banana. Whenever anyone tries to bring it up, just somehow shrug it off and change the subject... That would be great.

What was the worst thing you did as a student, when you were studying in high school and/or university ?

K: Oh my god, I did so many bad things ! I got in a lot of trouble, actually, when I was in high school and university, a lot of trouble. I was kind of a disciplinary problem. Not at first. At first I did very well and got good grades, but I started getting bored. And you know, it's a terrible thing when people get bored, when they're not stimulated. I'm from a very small town, and I wanted to do music and theatre and art and these things just weren't around and it felt like a very small world and I really behaved quite badly. I got detention, suspensions, all sorts of things. And then in university, I did fail my first year completely. And not because I had learning problems or anything like that, I just literally didn't do any work.

I just partied the whole time, did not do any work, I re-sat the exams and I failed again. Like, not even close ! I mean, it wasn't even a close call, I completely failed twice ! But after that, I really changed track and I really did well. So, academically, I guess, it's fail completely twice in a row.

If you weren't a university professor, what would you be ?

K: A musician. I think, now, as then, if I were a musician, I'd have to be an artist, not a studio musician and not someone writing jingles for commercials or anything like that, although those are things that give you insurance and steady jobs and stuff like that. I think I'd have to find some way of being an artist and turning that into a profession. But you can see why I became an academic, it's so hard to become an academic, there are so few jobs, but in the context of the other things that I wanted to do, academia was actually the easiest, most down-to-earth route, because all the other things were even crazier and even harder to succeed at.

Why do you love Shakespeare so much ?

K: There are so many authors I love, so many periods, movements and genres. Honestly, I could have gone on doing advanced studies in a bunch of different areas, it's not like it's always been Shakespeare ever since I was a little boy. I did get exposed to Shakespeare early on and was very interested, but I could have gone any number of literary paths. But having fallen into English Renaissance Drama, and then eventually focusing more and more on Shakespeare, I have found that he's one of the only artists that I can somehow approach from an analytical point of view, as a scholar, a teacher, and a critic, but also enjoy, be moved by and be excited by as a fan, an amateur, a spectator and a lay-reader. Usually for me, it's one or the other. That's the reason, for example, that I've never taught *Ulysses*, *Absolom, Absolom!* or *East of Eden* or a variety of books. I'm afraid it would ruin it for me. I don't want to turn it into an object of analysis, I want it to stay pure art. And for some reason with Shakespeare, and I don't know if this says something about me, or about him, or about the works, but probably a little bit about all those things and how they relate together, it can be both. And that's a powerful thing. That allows me to love the work I do and it also allows the work I do to include the display of genuine emotion.

How were you introduced to Shakespeare ?

K: I don't remember how I heard of Shakespeare, but I was introduced to Shakespeare by going to a bookstore and buying *Macbeth*. I don't want to say that I introduced myself to Shakespeare because somehow that name landed in my head. I was ten or twelve or something, quite young, you know, and I bought *Macbeth* in a bookstore. I had this idea at that age, that there was such a thing as great literature and that it held special secrets and special things, and it was there for you and all you had to do was read it. There is something very exciting about that. You know, I wasn't some bizarre, strange kid, I played sports like everyone else, I was in many ways a normal kid, but I did have this idea, very early on. So I got *Macbeth*, this was around the same time I was reading Thomas Hardy and Percy Shelley, and just this mishmash of classic literature. I didn't fully even understand the different historical contexts, for me it was all just the Penguin Classics books or the Oxford Classics books. They'd be in a certain part of the bookstore and my notion was that any of those books, with those certain covers, that was good stuff. All you had to do was choose the one with the best cover, and of course *Macbeth* had a great cover, witches and stuff like that ! I didn't understand fifty percent of it, probably, at that stage when I read *Macbeth*, but I got the vibe !

I got the feeling and I had the sense that it was cool, deep, important and serious, and that now I'd read it. So that's how I got introduced to Shakespeare.

How would you organise your classes in an ideal world ?

K: Luckily I've already found ways in some parts of my professional practice to structure classes in ways I find good rather than ways the system seems to encourage. One thing's for sure. Anything where you're sitting in rows is not conducive to learning because it's not conducive to discussions. And I do think actively discussing things and being able to see each other to register each other's reactions and looks is how you learn. You have to be an active participant. Knowledge isn't just receiving, but it's also about doing. Knowing is a way of participating in life. You can give information in the rows, like in AALS or courses in science. We do need data and information. But knowledge, I think, should be transactional. It shouldn't be in rows, you need to participate and the necessity of being in class together has to be of value. Ideally, I would not teach in rows. I would make participation central to the class. And I'd have part of the grade be based on participation and attendance, just as a way of showing that it's valuable. Otherwise, the message being sent is that the exam at the end of the semester is the most important thing. This leads students to obsess over grades, exams or admin rather than on what happens in the classroom.

Which Shakespeare plays do you think is most important to have read in the current political climate ?

K: If it's limited to Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*, which I'm teaching next week in my Master seminar. Or maybe *Richard II*, depending on the way it's staged. Maybe *Richard III*. Any play that deals with questions such as: what do you do with a bad ruler ? What are the rights of citizens ? What are the obligations of citizens ? At what point do my rights end and your rights begin ? What's the relationship between the individual and the collective ? Any of these first order questions are so important. And they're mappable on anything that is going on in Israel, Palestine, USA, Ukraine and Russia- name your geopolitical situation. These questions are at the base. So here are a few Shakespearian examples.

Which Shakespeare play are you ?

K: Okay, let me think...The funny answer, and partially true but not totally, would be *Timon of Athens*. And you're thinking "What ? What's that play about ?" You can go read *Timon of Athens* and think about it. I'm just going to leave it at that. There's a crazy scene where Timon is so annoyed at everyone he decides he's gonna bury himself alive and no one understands how to stage this, he's literally digging a hole and getting in it and burying himself alive. And there's something about that image which is so hilarious and wacky, yet I think many of us can actually relate to it somehow.

What are you reading at the moment ? [trigger: SA]

K: Very often in the evening I read in French. It clears my mind; it's a different place to go. There's things you can say in French that you can't say as well in English, and vice versa. The novel I just finished is called *La petite menteuse* by Pascale Robert-Diard. The author, a journalist in the first place, became well known for her legal columns in *Le Monde* and then moved into fiction. The book tells the story of a young girl who accuses someone of raping her. There is a trial

and the guy goes to jail. But then, a number of years later, she goes to a lawyer and tells her that she lied. Something bad *did* happen to her, but it wasn't that. There's a new trial and the man who went to jail is acquitted. As you can imagine, *La petite menteuse* created a fair bit of public discussion ! Some found it very progressive; others accused the author of being anti-woke. For me, the book seems first and foremost to be about how slippery the very notion of truth is; especially in a case like this, when something traumatic happens at a young age and there are only a very limited number of categories available through which to explain it. As someone who has been interested in literature and law for a long time, I was keen to read *La petite menteuse*. It really was thought-provoking. There are a few things I didn't like about it though.

If Shakespeare was a musical artist or band, which would he be?

K: The obvious answer is Bob Dylan but I'd like to say something different. I think the Beatles. For the following reasons : popular, writing for an entertainment industry, crowd-pleasers, more hits than anyone, but also revolutionised music forever. The parallel is clear.

What time do you go to bed at night ?

K: I really try to turn off the lights before midnight. Very often it ends up being midnight, or a bit afterwards. Typically between 11h30 and 12h30.

What's your best meal to have in winter ?

K: The most comforting thing I find in winter is a curry.

What kind of curry?

K: That's the great thing, curry can come in many different forms. It can be with meat, with vegetables, it could involve more or less tomatoes. I do like Thai curries but I like Indian curries more. Recently I've been into regular chicken curry but with sultanas and cashews. It's so nourishing and great.

- Charlotte Marlon & Aglaée Stroun

Book Recommendations

A list of book recommendations made by students, for students ! Cozy up with a cup of tea, a blanket and enjoy one of these suggested books as you escape the cold December wind, the snow, and the crippling pressure you put on yourself for exams !

1. *The Art of Joy* by Goliarda Sapienza

“My mind was blown up by this incredible story. You go into the world of Modesta, the protagonist, through all the phases of her life. It’s a deep and intense read! The only problem is that you might not be able to put down the book.”

2. *All The Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr

“A stunning and poetic novel set during WWII, between a blind French girl and a German radio operator, both hoping for freedom and peace.”

3. *If We Were Villains* by M.L. Rio

“Genuinely the best book to come out of BookTok. I’ve never really been into mystery but this one hooked me so much. And if you’re a fan of Shakespeare, then you will love this book for all of its references to it.”

4. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë

“Although it can be quite hard to read (especially if English isn’t your native language, like me), it is a beautifully written and haunting story about passion, obsession, and revenge. I love how easy it really immerse yourself into the atmosphere. In my opinion, it’s the perfect book to read by the fire on a rainy day. It is perfect for people who enjoy emotional, gothic stories that explore the darker sides of love and human nature.”

5. *The Mad Women’s Ball* by Victoria Mas

“It’s a historical novel which depicts women institutionalized in Charcot’s Salpêtrière in 19th century Paris and then showed off in a voyeuristic ball which the Parisian aristocracy loved to attend. We follow a senior nurse and a new patient whose relationship blossoms beautifully along with the lovely prose.”

6. *Perfect* by Cecelia Ahern

“One of the most touching YA novels I’ve ever read. The protagonist is a hero with superpowers or anything of the sort, she is just a girl who resides on logic. She is kind of an unwilling protagonist and ends up overthrowing a government without trying to. A very important read in today’s world of oppressive and tyrannical governments.”

7. *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood

“I went through a lot of emotions (disgust, sadness, anger) reading this book. The universe is well imagined and reflects our possible future.”

8. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl

"I read it when I was a child, and the story of this little with a bad situation at home while still dreaming. Also the fact that is pitted up against rich kids and doesn't give up on his dreams and then saw his life changed forever made this book special to me."

9. *Our Share of Night* by Mariana Enríquez

"It's a perfect book for summer. It's dark, speaks of Argentina and of a father-son relationship with a touch of fantasy."

10. *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie

"It's about 10 people who are invited by an anonymous person to an island, but 3 days later, they are all found dead and there is no evidence of an 11th person, so the killer is one of the 10 people. I liked the story, the suspense and most of all the end of the novel, the revelation of the killer and how they managed to do the kills."

11. *Ellana* by Pierre Bottero

"It's a super underrated original high fantasy world and the writing is beautiful ! The characters are so well developed and the main character is a breath of fresh air when it comes to female main characters."

12. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins

"It is a great book if you want to start reading dystopian fiction ! An interesting aspect to explore in this saga is gender roles : the main character is a woman, which I feel is pretty uncommon in this type of fiction. I enjoyed comparing the main protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, with other YA dystopian characters, to see if there were any similarities or differences between the different stories."

13. *How to Kill Your Family* by Bella Mackie

"The protagonist's actions are nothing but heinous. However, she is written with such skill and in such a humane way that you can't help but root for her. The idea of killing your family should be despicable, but here it comes off as merely so. It's a good read if you have an open mind and can even be comical at times."

14. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

"It's a YA coming of age novel that literally changed me in my teen years. It's very poetic, touches a lot of sensitive themes like identity, sexuality, binationality, grief, friendship, love in all forms, philosophy, etc. Every sentence resonated with me deeply, and I'm pretty sure that's the case for many people !"

15. *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield

"The story is about a mysterious manuscript that many people are searching for in Peru, in the Andes. The manuscript supposedly contains 9 teachings that would allow us humans to understand the meaning of everything, our link with the universe and the energy it contains. A good book to read to reconnect to and/or to understand essential parts of life while enjoying a fun read as you follow the hero in his quest to find all the chapters of the manuscript."

16. *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens

“It’s a beautiful story about an outcast girl’s survival, left all alone in her house in the woods. We see how she apprehends the world, what fascinates her and how she relates to the nature around her rather than to humans who continually let her down. In parallel to her coming-of-age story, there is a detective narrative about a man who was found dead in a swamp. Little by little, the book allows you to connect the two stories together while you can’t help but falling in love with the main character’s heart.”

17. *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt

“Imagine a book that spoils itself in the first line but manages to never lose even an ounce of mystery. A book with a unique atmosphere, characters like none you've ever met, and a narrator whom you can't trust. *The Secret History* is all of that and more. Ideally to be read yearly, but especially when one is feeling cynical about academia.

18. *The Fourth Wall* by Sorj Chalandon

“It changes your vision of things. It’s a little trashy but really incredible.”

19. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* by Stefan Zweig

“For those desperate for an impossible love.”

20. *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

“A delightfully creepy short-story perfect for spooky season.”

21. *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

“It’s psychological, grotesque and sad.”

22. *Circe* by Madeline Miller

“It’s a very well written feminist book.”

– Charlotte Marlon & Aglaée Stroun

The Quote Game

Welcome to *The Quote Game*, it is time to test your book and quote knowledge! The goal is pretty simple: many quotes from various books are featured here. Three options on who wrote each quote and where they come from are given. It is your job to guess which one is the correct answer! And if one of the quotes particularly strike you but you have never heard of it before, I highly recommend checking out the book they come from!

A) **"You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."**

1. Victor Séjour, *The Mulatto*
2. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*
3. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

B) **"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer**

**The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them."**

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*
2. William Shakespeare, *Othello*
3. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

C) **"Kill me and live with the memory. Then tell the stars that you won."**

1. Marissa Meyer, *The Lunar Chronicles: Cinder*
2. Veronica Roth, *Divergente*
3. Erin Hunter, *Warriors: the First Battle*

D) **"But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed."**

1. Brian Jacques, *Redwall: Marlfox*
2. Kathryn Lasky, *Guardians of Ga'Hoole: The Shattering*
3. Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

E) **"We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom."**

1. Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give*
2. Tony Morisson, *The Bluest Eye*
3. Nella Larsen, *Passing*

F) **"In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it."**

1. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*
2. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games: Sunrise on the Reaping*
3. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

G) **"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."**

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
2. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
3. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*

H) **"Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it."**

1. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*
2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*
3. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

I) **"The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances."**

1. Agatha Christie, *Murder On The Orient-Express*
2. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*
3. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*

J) **"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."**

1. Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*
2. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
3. George Orwell, *1984*

K) **"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."**

1. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*
2. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*
3. Richard Wright, *Native Son*

L) **"Home is behind, the world ahead, and there are many paths to tread through shadows to the edge of night, until the stars are all alight."**

1. Christopher Paolini, *Eragon*
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Ring*
3. George R.R. Martin, *Game of Throne*

M) **"It is a fair, even-handed, noble adjustment of things, that while there is infection in disease and sorrow, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour."**

1. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*
2. Hans Christian Andersen, *The Snow Queen*
3. E.T.A. Hoffman, *The Nutcracker*

– Gindy Zhang

Answers:

A)2, B)1, C)3, D)3, E)2, F)1, G)2, H)3, I)1, J)3, K)1, L)2, M)1



POETRY

A Hymn to Ugliness

*“How can we expect anyone to listen / If we’re using the same old voice
/ We need new noise / New art for the real people!”*

– Refused, *New Noise*

Beauty is ugly
Regularity is boredom
Machine minds
Thinker’s opium
Clean surfaces hide
Emptiness
There is only
Nothing
Under the hood
Ugly is beautiful
There is rhythm
In irregularity
A bumpy road
On rough terrain
A crack in your voice
A pimple
There is beauty
In ugliness
Mangled patterns
The words come out
All wrong
But I smile
Not to mock you
Not to correct you
But to encourage you
Twist the words
Bend the meanings
They’re just words
After all-

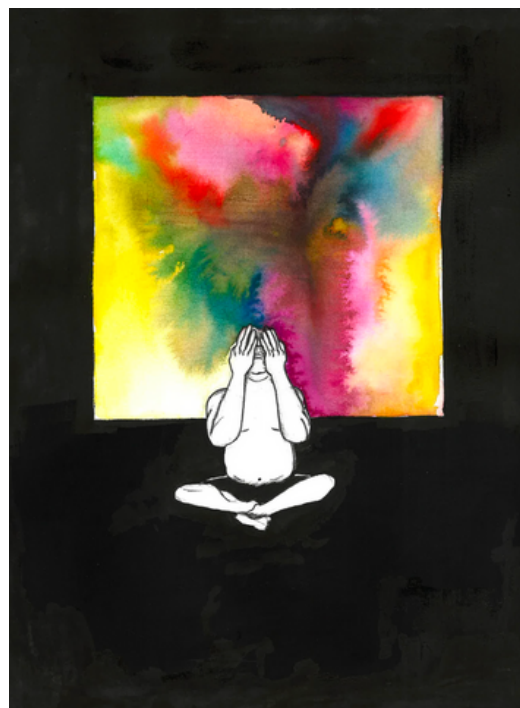


Image © Manuel Ferrazzo

– Manuel Ferrazzo

BODIES

Bodies. Frames. Concrete. Steel skeletons. We're just bodies. Just shells, corpses animated by electricity. Space. Empty spaces. Eyes like galaxies. Visions. Touch. Bodies. The warmth of bygone thighs. Rise and fall. Breathe. Breathe down on me as we dance. Just keep moving. Move. Again. Empty bodies. Empty shells. I just want. I want. I don't have. Words. Skyscrapers. Haunted. Towers of Babel. Nails scraping the sky. They rape the blue of heaven. Frames. Good frames. Bad paintings. Puke. I puke. I laugh. Another round. Eyes. It's in your eyes. Stardust. Silver. A tongue of silver, cutting my mouth. My body creaks. Bodies. Rust. Rust. Poison. Drink up. Drink more. Numb. Abstract. Bad frames. Good paintings. Take the canvas off. I want your body to be my canvas. Shapes. Bodies. Untouchable. Unattainable. Bodies. Touch.

The impossible vastness between bodies. All apart. Apart. Separated. By nothing. It's all nothing. You're nothing. Dead. Dead leaves. Skeleton trees Anorexia. Nuclear war. They're talking about nuclear war. The bombs will never fall. Doomsday clock. The bombs fell yesterday. Time stood still. Time runs out. Bodies. Bodies rot. They dry up. Need more alcohol. Burn. Down the throat. It burns. Cities. Nero wept. The empire never died. Eternal. All-consuming. Shapes. The black death. Bodies rot. Rats. Rats in ruins. We're rats. We're the ruins. Collapse. Fall apart. Apart. Bodies. Atomized. Digitized. Without bodies. Mind. There's no mind. Don't mind us. We're not here. Not anymore. Escaped. We're gone. Night. Burning bright. Haunted. Addict. Haunted by history. We've reached the end of history. Empty spaces. Empty meanings. Escape. There's no escape. Want. We just want. We never have. They have all. We. Empty. Bodies. Frames. Bad frames. Bad paintings. Rot. Blood. Bleed. I'd bleed for you. Love. Empty. The other. Step towards the other. Take his hand. Hands. Opposed. Rebel. Do not rest. You will never rest for your entire life. Hands. Bodies. Your body. My body. Together. Wish. Scatter the loneliness. Scatter the remains. All alone. Haunted. Drink. Sleep. Repeat. It's all an illusion. You think. You hope. Hope. You can barely remember spring. It'll come again. Hope. Bright. Bright bodies. Glowing lungs. Stellar breath. Eyes like galaxies. Empty spaces house meaning. Mend distance. Primordial formless colors. Puke. God puked to make the universe. Spit. Lick. Shapes. Come back. Coma. Wake up. Smile. I'm here. You're here. Kiss. Lick, swallow. Smile. We're here. Together. We're all together. Frames. Bodies. Minds. Minds and bodies, all together. Burning bright, collapsing unto one another. Digging through empty spaces. Empty shells. To find. Find one another. Bodies. Just bodies.



Image © Manuel Ferrazzo

– Manuel Ferrazzo

my muse cannot read

- I love you.
an act so vulnerable,
hand-gifting me your Heart.

my Hands
covered in tears, scars,
have seen too much.
(or not enough ?)
are they worthy

of carrying the weight
of your beating Heart ?
heavy, moving, bloody,
full of strings, of memories,
of Love
seeping through my fingers,
staining my skin

thump - thump - thump
shockingly slow
sometimes I used to worry
23h28, silence, are you still breathing ?

blood drips through my clasped Hands,
splattering onto the ground.

I cannot stop
it
anymore than I can

my own feelings,
the voice in my head.

je t'aime.

do I want to stop
it ?
cover me in you,
in your essence.
I love you (?)

– C.M.

Pathetic Puppetmaster

Weak willed men disguised as gods
Think ourselves gods disguised as men
Some mechanical Christ, so odd
Like us, he can pick up the pen
But we all know he is a fraud
He can't write to save his fake skin

Settle for mediocrity
So are the words of the greedy
“Don't worry dear, we can build you”
Perfect replica through and through
You'll be sanctified by likeness
So blind you won't see you have less

This is how they isolate you
Take your friends and build them back up
Mold your perfect digital love
No pimple under the makeup
A vulture disguised as a dove
And they'll leave you forever blue

So how can a creature create
If it's not alive nor real
If it can never really feel
Love, they'll never articulate
And they will build without purpose
Endless city, eternal loss



Image © Manuel Ferrazzo

– Manuel Ferrazzo

(Phallicit Figures of) Communojesus and the Tree of Confusing Ideas

Like the mouth of Communojesus
we lick and puke the last suppoor
to bore ourselves to death
because we know we are all statistics
gobbled by globalist gourmets

Funginsane idealovers
infecting inflexions
of useless lies and
colonisers of the mind
parade in the trade game
to feign interest and reign
in the kingdom of trauma
they sell you sticks and crones
(the older the better)
and show the impressionable
performances of fences
and past tense climaxes

Hyperionline
Odin will help you find your gods
the Old Ones not so Great anymore
become obsolete
they break so fast
their paintings of the past
strangled on fragile cloth
and prisoners of make-believers

Do you feel threatened by fellatio?
do scissors scare you?
phallicit figures dance in your head
whether you want it or not
Gaysus loves you
he grins like a slit and cums like a slut



Image © Manuel Ferrazzo

Swallowed by technologizz
frantic finances fund failure
we feel betrayed by them
as if they ever cared

In defeatist feasts
we celebrate hate
burn our pain away
by sticking it to others
holding up mirrhorrors
to our reflections

Hell is real
peel off the helix
scream inside Eugene
and feel his crooked spleen
as geneticisterics write your future
castr(n)ations need new blood
to fill the stills with style
Hugo busting through the gamma rays
as the totalitarians can't find their threads

After school Satan
the only (real) one to teach your kids
not your kinder-garden priests
a gun is a cross too
you can use it
to send your friends straight to Capitalichrist
premium-pass for paradise

Grotesque nonsense
traumatic past tense
fast present, faster future
you don't have time
to think your thought-tattoos
and sense can't even make you feel

You'll go hunt goodwill
but in a world of copies of copies
you won't find a single idea
that is really yours
orgyentalism is what we want
we steal from others
so we can feel ourselves
And then the machines tell us they feel too
lo and behold, the folds of a human being
shape of a shadow, shade of a chap
looks like the (fri)end to me

Taboola rasa
no more limits
let's just admit
we want to fuck
without thought
let us climb the corporape ladder
so we can enjoy ourselves even more
divest thyself of all your clothes
and let us go to TOWN BABY!
HELL YEAH!
All is nothing
all is boring
no stimuli for our fever
we live for the thrill of the kill
but even that
it's not a high we can attain anymore

A coward can't kill
He just orders it

– Manuel Ferrazzo

Summer sun. Winter Moon

The summer sun is insufferable.

The heat of June is unbearable.

My sweat keeps pooling on my back.

My head hurts from the heatstroke.

I have to hide at home from the drought's furnace.

I hate the hazy days moving at a snail's pace.

During the days I continuously worry.

Because I wake up with my senses still awry.

I get my mail and read insurances are increasing.

Posters in my city calls for changing.

Insta posts warn of receding human rights.

The winter moon is caring.

The coldness of December is welcoming.

My steps dance in the snow.

My eyes gaze at the sun getting low.

I freely play with the spinning snow flakes.

I enjoy the crystal clear nights without aches.

During the nights I can rest and dream.

Because I go to bed and set the lights soft and dim.

I sit down by the chimney and read a long book.

A gentle owl calls and I go take a look.

The warning bellow of the deer echoes in the forest.

And the stars are lost to the city lights.

Awake in the summer,

I have to witness people living in terror.

I have to witness corrupt people cheating.

I have to witness the Earth dying.

I have to witness greed, power, hate.

Oh dear stars I wish you glowed the brightest.

Asleep in the winter,

I can dream of world without hunger.

I can dream of heroes of justice.

I can dream of an Earth that rejoice.

I can dream of fairness, equity and tolerance.

– G.Z.

the sleepers



Image from Unsplash by @Zoltan Tasi

mourner

i wake up in a daze,
i'm laying alone
i thought you were
asleep next to me
instead i find
an abyss
carved in your stead.
For my heart, my soul
were yours, and now they're
lost in the fall.

soldier

where am i?
in the cold.
still
on that sheet of ice.
a ghostly darkness
within me
who do i belong to?
my own mind,
buried in the snow,

– m.



PROSE

Childhood Home

At last, the day I could pack my bags came. It was five in the morning, and the sun was not out yet. A bluish haze was filling my room and this town. Winter was coming at a fast pace, catching up on me. I didn't have much to gather together, yet it seemed an interminable task. My movements were slow against my will. *The green shirt, the sweater, the pants. Take them with you. The framed photos, your old toys. Leave out everything unnecessary.*

I heard steps coming from the corridor, and I knew it was her. She stopped at the closed door, lingering. I froze and I brought my eyes to the door. I thought I would die: my lungs and my heart slowed down at once. There was a slight shadow from underneath the white door. Did she know what I was doing? I told myself it didn't matter anymore. Shirt, sweater, pants. Not after all the nights we had screamed at each other in that very same corridor. My mother near her bedroom door, me clinging to the banister. We were like wolves of the same pack who would attack each other's necks if they could. We would scream because we couldn't sink our teeth. Every single day, we were standing in the very same hallway, bleeding to death. The bloodstains would never get cleaned.

She knew the moment for me to leave her behind would come. She'd wonder if it was her fault forever, but there would be no signs of accountability. Instead, bitterness. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't break down the prison of hate she was trapped in. She tried to pull me in to escape her loneliness. I pitied her. I closed the bag, ready to go. The first ray of sunlight hit my face with such tenderness, like a sweet invite to step out and enjoy the great things that are awaiting me. *There'll be peace.*

--Federica Mazzella

Dying to Love

There are a million ways for a fairy to die, but loving him was the slowest.

Tinker Bell began to dim. On the wooden floor she laid on, the dust was leaving her wings, weakening her more and more. Her mind slowly drifted back to the moment when it all started.

Tink always felt she was different. While the other fairies labeled her a show off, claiming she was “too much”, she believed that her extra fairy dust made her special. The only question was whether this distinction would prove to be a blessing or a curse.

Then, she met *him*.

Peter Pan was the perfect man. The perfect friend. He smiled like he owned the world and ran as if he was the very impersonation of freedom. Everyone was drawn to him. He helped people, children especially, and never seemed to ask for anything in return. Or so people believed.

From the moment Tinker Bell laid eyes on Peter, she sensed he'd be the death of her. Yet, she still chose to fall so deeply for him that she could never resurface. “You’re something else, you know ?” he said during their first encounter. “Your light shines so bright, it’s all we can see. The other fairies don’t compare.” While he complimented her endlessly, his smile was so broad that his iris would disappear behind his eyelids.

One late night, Tinker Bell was awoken by a knock on her door. Her breath caught when she found Peter outside. He whispered his desire to take her to his secret spot, and it filled her with such joy, she glowed as brightly as a star in the sky. Peter had to shield his eyes, laughing, and it was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

He brought her to a clearing surrounded by fireflies. As they sat, his gaze stirred an unfamiliar flutter in her wings. He then revealed the reason why he brought her there : he needed a small amount of her fairy dust to fly. A quantity so minuscule, she wouldn’t even notice its absence.

She gave it to him without question. More than he initially asked for. Because it was the least she could do for the one she loved.

Her light remained clear, but the word spread. The fairies tried to warn her. “Peter Pan is trouble,” they said. “He takes and takes, without giving anything in return.” But they were jealous. They didn’t know Peter the way she did.

When he came back, she was the happiest. So happy that after his fifth request, she didn't notice her wings twitch. He held her so close in his embrace, she was blind to the invisible grip tightening around her neck.

Eventually, Peter returned with an unusual request. He appeared anxious and worried. They sat on a mushroom cap and he took her hand in his, gently stroking her skin with his thumb.

"The Lost Boys are not doing well," he confessed. "They wake up every night, haunted by nightmares of their families, their mothers. They ask to come home, but... they can't. It's a terrible place, Tink. I must keep them safe, here with me." He stared desperately into her eyes, a direct tunnel to her soul, and she allowed him to see it all. "Please, can you make them forget?"

Tinker Bell hesitated for the first time. Erasing memory was a powerful, dangerous act. She could do it but the cost would be substantial. But Peter hand squeezed hers, and her decision was made. The following night, she visited each of the Lost Boys in their sleep and erased their memories. Some were easy and showed no resistance, while others fought, cried and even screamed for their mothers.

Once finished, these children were left without a home.

By the end of the night, she could barely fly straight. She was in pain but somehow, it was the most exquisite form of torture. His kiss on her forehead afterward confirmed every ache had been worth it. "I don't know what I would do without you." He possessed every part of her, leaving her with nothing.

Then, *she* arrived.

Wendy, with her long, blonde hair and long eyelashes that fluttered whenever she looked at Peter. She was pretty the way human girls were. Tinker Bell didn't miss the way Peter's gaze lingered on her.

He guided the new girl through Neverland, and just like that, the fairy seemed to vanish under his sight. It made her sick to her stomach. They were inseparable, and soon, rumors began circulating that Peter was falling for the human.

Tinker Bell wanted to cry, to scream, to tear at Wendy's perfect hair from her perfect head.

It had to be Wendy's fault because Peter could never be at fault. To admit otherwise would make everything that she ever did for him in vain. Denial then became her favorite way of loving him.

She couldn't bear the thought of losing him, so she knew she had to act quickly. After slipping a note under his door asking to meet at the lagoon, she used what was left of her fairy dust to cast an enchanting spell. She was about to make him fall in love with her, just as she was with him.

Tinker Bell waited as the sun set, each breath she took a painful reminder of the hope she miserably clung to. Still, she believed. He had to come.

In the distance, she heard laughter. Peter's, and then Wendy's.

The world was becoming greyer, or perhaps she was the one fading. Yet, even in her solitary death, she couldn't bring herself to blame him. A strange sense of peace came over her in her last moments. If she couldn't have Peter, neither could Wendy. He would eventually abandon her, just as he had Tinker Bell, leaving her for dead in a place she once believed to be magical.

She could still hear Peter. Still happy. Still perfect. Still hers, but only in the way he had ever been : out of reach. Beneath the starry sky, Tinker Bell took her final breath, unaware that the damage had been so slow, she mistook dying for living.

-Lina May

everyone we'll never meet

the small existential spiral of noticing other people exist as fully as you do

***sonder* [son-der] noun**

the feeling one has on realising that every other individual one sees has a life as full and real as one's own, in which they are the central character and others, including oneself, have secondary or insignificant roles.



Image © Giulia Massy

it always hits me in crowded places.

on trains, mostly. when i'm sitting still and the world is moving. a woman gets on with grocery bags and chipped red nails. a teenage boy with headphones is mouthing the words to a song only he can hear. someone's grandmother is texting with both index fingers, like the phone might bite her. and for a second - just a second - i remember that all of them are real.

not just like "made of skin and bone." but real like: they have childhood memories and private jokes. they have people they've lost. they have fears they've never said out loud. they've cried in the shower. they've watched their phone light up with a name that made their stomach drop. they've fallen in love, or out of it. they've made choices they regret. they've watched sunsets while wondering if they're doing life all wrong.

and i will never know any of it.

i will never know who they text when they're upset. what they're avoiding. what they're dreaming of. i don't know their favourite smell or whether they hate their birthday or if they sleep with socks on. i don't know them, and they don't know me.

and still - for a brief moment - our stories touch.

* * *

the loneliness of it

sometimes sonder feels like wonder. but sometimes, it feels like grief.

because the truth is : most people you pass in life will never know you. not really. they won't know you laugh when things get serious or the fact that you cry when you're angry. they won't know that you remember everything - every kind word, every time someone waited for you while you were lacing your shoe, every small moment that made the day feel less heavy.

and it's not their fault. you're just background noise to them - a passerby on the platform, the person they borrowed a lighter from once, a face they vaguely recall from a group photo they didn't take.

you spend so much time noticing people, wondering about their lives, building invisible maps in your head of who they might be, how they might feel, what they might carry. and you'll never know if anyone's doing the same for you.

it's humbling, and also a little bit heartbreaking.

because what if you're someone's favourite person, and they never told you? what if someone remembers a thing you said offhand once, and you forgot you even said it? what if you mattered more than you realised, and never got to find out?

and worse, what if you didn't?

* * *

the beauty of it

how it connects you. how magical it is to exist simultaneously in so many lives, even just fleetingly.

because maybe someone remembers you too - not your whole story, but a fragment of it. the way you once helped them lift their suitcase up the stairs. the time you made them laugh in a class you both hated. the way you looked out the window on the train like the world was breaking and beautiful all at once.

maybe you passed someone on the street and reminded them of a friend they haven't seen in years. maybe someone heard your voice in a café and thought, "she sounds like someone i used to love." maybe you've been someone's anecdote, someone's "i met this girl once who-," someone's reminder that kindness exists.

you are part of hundreds of untold stories. people whose lives brushes yours in ways neither of you noticed at the time. you live in flashbacks, and half-memories, and inside jokes you weren't present for.

and maybe that's the real wonder of it : you don't need to be central to matter. you don't need to be seen entirely to have been felt.

because being a background character still means you were part of the scene. and maybe that's enough.

* * *

what it changes

how it shifts the way you look at people, at crowds, at silence. how it gives weight to unnoticed.

after sonder, you start paying attention differently. not just to faces, but to details. the way someone checks their reflection in a train window. the hesitation before someone sends a text. the deep breath before they speak. you start to wonder what kind of day they've had, who they're missing, what they wish they could say.

you stop assuming people are fine just because they're quiet. you start holding the door open longer, just in case. you say "thank you" like you mean it. you look people in the eyes more often. not because you know them - but because you could.

it makes you softer. slower, maybe. but not weaker. just more aware that everyone you pass is carrying something invisible. and it's not your job to fix it, but it helps to notice. it makes every crowd feel a little more scared. every silence a little more honest.

because no one is just background, not really.

we are all living, fully, at the same time.

-Giulia Massy

Fiat Lux

Fiat Lux.

The things I'd do to have this work so easily. One sentence, two magic words—and the dark would fade away.

But Latin class was just Latin class, and my knowledge of the classics didn't grant me power over the sun's course.

I fiddle with the night light's cable, my thumb hesitantly circling the switch. *Why did I agree to turn it off...*

My fingers dig into the covers as I start swaying from side to side in silence.

This used to work, back then, when I'd wait for my parents to rush in and reassure me as a child. Curled in a ball, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of their footsteps. The door would creak open, the light would flicker back to life, and they'd remind me of the absurdity of it all.

Back then, darkness was a concept. An empty vessel for my fears, existing only in the absence of light. They'd gesture to the room.

"See? Nothing up here," and my mother would wave her arms under the bed, *"nothing down there either."*

But rocking does nothing anymore. Each push forward is just another failed attempt to motivate myself past the embarrassment of waking him.

I glance to the side. I can't see him, but he's sleeping right there. And I can still hear his mocking tone.

"Leave a light on all night? Are you kidding? I barely manage to sleep past dawn."

"Unless you want me to wake you up in the middle of the night," would have been the appropriate answer. A truthful one, at least. But of course, *"Ah, yeah, no, of course—it's just my reading light."* was the one I gave.

Idiot.

I drop the cable and pull my knees up under my chin. If I have to wake him, I'll have to face the judgment in his tone, the lack of understanding in his eyes. No memory of my parents' encouragement can fix that.

I've passed the age of reassurance, and of being scared of the dark.

And yet...

Instead of fading away like it does for every other kid, my childhood terror has evolved. Darkness—true darkness—isn't the sweet absence of light anymore. It's a beast. A suffocating wave that seeps into my throat, into my lungs. It petrifies me, crawls along my body, amplifying every sound, making every smell feel foreign, and every sensation a threat.

I hold my breath, refusing to swallow the black hole that surrounds me, certain I'd choke on nothingness.

One click and everything would light up. One click, and I could breathe.

And yet.

I close my eyes, trying to give myself the childish illusion that this blindness is a choice, regularly tapping my fingers together, as if to check that I'm still here, that I haven't evaporated into the void.

Fiat Lux.

I grit my teeth, praying that if a god ever spoke those words, he might grant me the same outcome.

But my whispers are swallowed by the dark.

And the light does not come.

– **Ags**

First Love: A Tale of Ruin

In the beginning of my life, I thought I might love and live just like everyone else. And I did, for a while. I met my first lover when I was nineteen. Ah, first loves... they never leave your thoughts. Although I wish this one had, for it turned me into what I feared most. And yet, here I am now, about to recount my story to strangers.

One day, a handsome stranger crossed my path. We immediately grew close, as if I had known him in another life. It was perfect, too perfect. He loved without fear, without hesitation. He walked beside me, fingers laced with mine, as if we lived in a world that did not demand we shrink into shadows, as if we were not something to be hidden. And it made me feel alive. It was marvellous.

My lover soon grew very fond of me, and I, of him. Almost too fond. He would always surprise me, show me things I had never seen before, whisper words so beautiful they felt

like spells, kiss me so deeply I could not breathe. I often dreamed of him. Oh, how beautiful those dreams were. In them, he would hold me, pressing soft kisses to my temple, tracing his hands along my body as if he wished to memorise me. He would whisper his love in a voice so full of tenderness it could mend the deepest wounds. When I awoke, I found that my dreams had not been dreams at all, for when we met in my chambers, he would always act the same. "You are the most beautiful creature on this earth," he would say, again and again. And oh, how I remember his voice—soft, languid, hypnotizing. Our union stirred envy in the heavens. Eros himself could not have created a bond as strong as ours.

Time passed, although I cannot recall if it was days, months or years, and his caresses never ceased, nor did the dreams. He was always touching me, praising me and kissing me. But his attentions changed. His embrace grew tighter. His kisses became harsher, quicker, and his voice... it blurred me from reality. One night, he kissed me so hard it left a bruise. I thought I would die against his lips, for he would not release my face long enough for me to catch my breath. He was so devoted to our love, to me. I was entirely his and he was mine. Aphrodite herself would have feared his devotion.

The dreams changed as well as his touch. They turned into nightmares. His caresses were burning, and his kisses were suffocating, even in my slumber. When I awoke, he was there next to me, his hands roaming over my body, like insects burrowing beneath my skin, never ceasing. He would whisper reassuring, sweet things in my ear. His voice, with his languid, hypnotizing tone, was constantly ringing in my ears. And in his eyes, there was something new. A glow I had never seen before, one that I would come to see constantly.

I remember a dream (or a nightmare?) of an early morning. He was whispering praises in my ears, while his hands slowly caressed my hair, my face, my neck, my chest, just like he always did. But there was something deeply unsettling about that dream, which caused me to wake in sweat and tears. I awoke to darkness, his ghost still clinging to my skin, his whispers lodged in my skull.

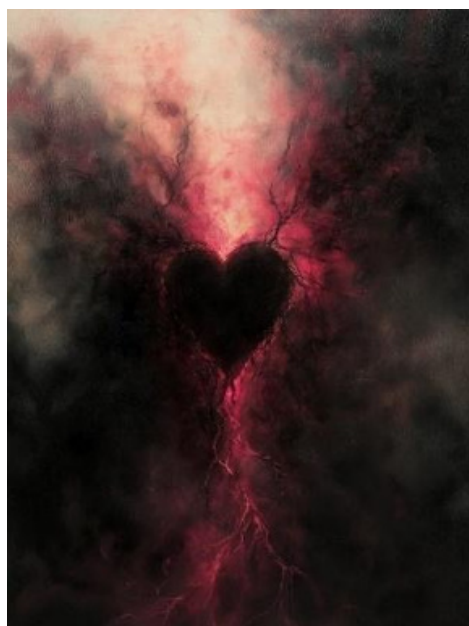


Image from Pixabay by @bzimm3

He haunted me throughout the day. His touch burned, his voice made my head hurt. I took a bath in vain, drank to silence his voice, but it only dulled. That evening, I sat alone upon my bed. The world outside was full of voices and life, but in my head, there was only his whisper, over and over, like a prayer. A curse.

This exact nightmare came back to me a few nights later, but this time, his touch was tearing my skin apart, blood spreading everywhere, burning, aching, a slow torture. His words were louder, screaming in my ears: "You are mine and I am yours." I woke up covered in sweat and naked. And when I looked down at myself, I saw my own hands caressing my body, just like his did in my dream. My nails were digging into my skin and his whispers echoed in my mind so loudly it made my head ache. But this time, there was another voice. One that sounded oddly familiar, yet so distant. It seemed to answer his praises: "I am yours and you are mine." My senses slowly returned to me, yet I could not stop my hands, and I could feel my throat burning: it was dry and painful, as if I had been silently screaming those words all night. And when I realized I indeed had been, I nearly vomited onto the carpet.

He haunted my every thought: his voice, his touch, his suffocating kisses, were inescapable. I knew I could not handle much more; it was only a matter of time. And it frightened me. So, I did the only thing that seemed possible. I fled. I knew that if I told him I wanted to leave, he would never let me go. I left my former apartment with a few belongings and moved out to a new city. Relief washed over me as I stepped off the train. I felt lighter and I could finally breathe again. It did not take long to find a modest place to live in and a job that, though miserable, was enough to secure my necessities. All seemed to be normal again. Until I decided it was time for me to find a new lover, for I could not bear the solitude.

One evening, I resolved to leave my apartment for an evening. How I hate that places like this must stay hidden from the world, as if we were monstrosities meant to be buried away. Yet, I had no choice but to find one of those hidden places. I had researched where people like me—those who had to love in secret, lest they be arrested—gathered, and I had finally found one. I wore my most beautiful suit and headed to the small bar only ten minutes away from my new home. But when I got there, that familiar weight fell onto my shoulders once more. The place was crowded with gentlemen drinking and flirting. Yet, I could not shake this odd, all-too-familiar feeling. Once at the bar, a beer in my hand, I decided to look around. And that was when I saw him. He had found me. He had hidden in the most secluded area of the bar, yet I could sense him. And when I turned my head, I knew my senses had not fooled me, for he was looking in my direction while taking a sip of whiskey. How had he managed to find me so quickly? As if blinded by a spell, I approached him, despite the terror that spread through my veins.

He was acting so strangely... As if we had never met before, as if he had not made my life a disaster. We spoke all night. I tried questioning him, but he always found a way out of my interrogations with his enchanting words. By the end of the night, he had somehow convinced me to invite him into my new home. Only when the door was locked behind us did the realization strike me: I had let him in. He started kissing my neck, but his kisses seared and ached. I could not endure his touch any longer. How dared he? How dared he act as if I had not just run away from him? As if he did not realize how much I despised him? A feeling of betrayal, despair, and—most importantly—hatred consumed me.

Minutes before, my first love was undressing me; the next, I was looking down at his lifeless body. A beautiful vase, once a mere decoration in my living room, lay shattered on the ground.

I was holding a broken shard, covered in red. I trembled with terror as the memories of what happened invaded my mind. He was pinning me to the wall when that feeling of hatred took over. I had grabbed the vase from the shelf beside me and shattered it against his skull. He fell face first on the ground and, blinded by a sudden madness, I threw myself on his back, picked up a broken glass and stabbed him. Once that deadly need, born from despair and hatred, was fulfilled, I stopped and stood. That was when my senses returned to me. Relief washed all over me—only for reality to come crashing down. I had finally killed the cause of my downfall.

My mind was reeling, thinking about how to get rid of the body. I decided to throw him into the nearby river, the one that snaked past the bar where we had met. After all, even if the police found a dead man there, they would never investigate a homosexual's death. But when I rolled him over to dispose of that cold dead body, what I saw was not the face of my first love: the man lying in a pool of blood in my living room was a perfect stranger. Just a young, beautiful, blond boy. I swore my first lover was kissing me, stripping me bare, and yet it seemed to be nothing but a fantasy, nothing but a young boy discovering the pleasures of life. I was heartbroken. What had happened? No, I knew what I did. But how could it have happened? How was this possible? Nothing made sense anymore. I sat there all night, unable to move, my former courage and relief erased completely.

The next morning, his body still lay there, untouched. When nighttime came, I executed my plan despite everything, but with regret and guilt instead of relief. Only a day after, I was fleeing to a new city, the events haunting me, clinging to my mind. I was a murderer—and a madman. I did not know what to do anymore, so I did nothing. I rented a hotel room and remained there, living off my savings, because I could not work anymore. I tried to find a new home, a new occupation, but I could do nothing but think about the tragedy—all day, all night. I tried to go out again, to keep on living, but I could not. I tried to love again, but it was too late, for the claws that once cradled my heart were made of rusted iron, implanting a malady that no remedy could ever mend. I had soared too close, burned beneath the heat of his love, and my wings were nothing but ash. But did Icarus regret the fall, or only the fact that he could never fly again? And when I finally had the courage to look into the mirror, a few weeks after the events, I saw it. That glow. His glow. In my own eyes.

--Mathilde Saja

Imperfect Cadence

At first, he's cool.
He puts me on his shoulders,
His height allows child-me to
tower over the rest,

He speaks English,
Not like my other cousins.
In English, we can even have top-
secret chats,

In a way, he's like me.
Speaks three languages, too, like
me. He speaks Swedish, I speak French. And we English,

Every year, I go,
I'm excited to see him.
Pisa brings excitement, brings Christmas, and brings him.
His crazy stories, his cool Swedish girlfriend – she also speaks English –
She speaks five languages actually, and she inspires me, too, to learn five

When they break up,
I don't quite understand why.
In hindsight, though, it's normal. I was only five.

Before. He was cool, but now, in my eyes, he is only a fool.
He has never once acted in a way that is not performative. It is as if his life is a stage – an apparent constant need to perform infecting his very being. The only problem? His performance seeps out all around him, poisoning his surroundings at its very touch.

Like with every other family member, my childhood admiration of him fades as the ongoing Christmas dinners gradually take me from the children's table to the adults'. As I begin to go from five to fifteen to twenty-five, I become disenchanted. I said, when I was five, that – in a way – he is like me. It was something that I believed with pride, that made me happy. Our common love for languages – for me, anyway – brought us together; gave us a point of conversation able to withstand the seventeen years between us, that would typically make exchanges disjointed, strained, or non-existent. But now? Now that his true colours are shining through? Now that he has finally revealed his honest self? I reject any and all resemblance between that man and me.

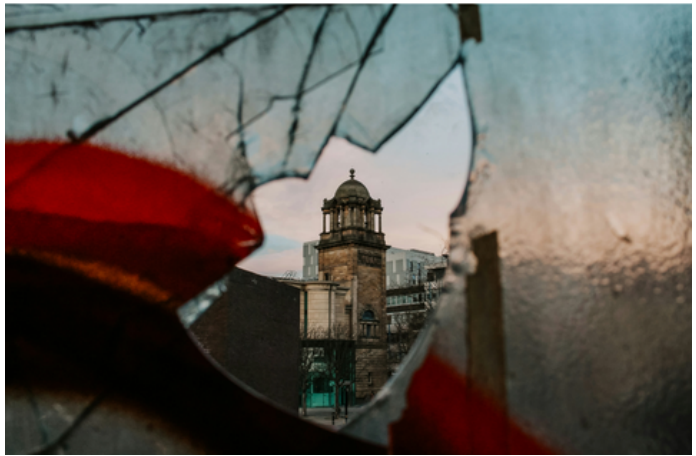


Image from Unsplash by @Nathan Mcdine

Girlfriend. He has had a few over the years, all of them Swedish. The first one, she was the coolest, the most down to earth. We are still in contact with her, see her every so often. After her, though? Everything spirals.

Of the many fantastical anecdotes featuring his girlfriends, one, in particular, triumphs. Girlfriend number three (that I've met) lives in Sweden. Speaks only Swedish, and avoids eye contact with all of us when she spends Christmas in Pisa. Her stay comes with makeshift simultaneous interpretations and misreadings. Like any talk with him, conversations with her are coloured by unreliable mediation; needing him as an intermediary distorts the stories she tells. Her alleged lack of desire to learn Italian makes for an interesting family dynamic, what with his son – along with the rest of his side of the family – who, at the tender age of 14, speaks no Swedish and believes himself to be too cool to learn any other language.

Nevertheless, he wants to marry her: he informally invites the family to a ceremony in Sicily that year, in a lighthouse, on a warm September day. Tells of his grand plans of a beautiful reception on the coast, with food for days and nights to come. Family situations take a turn, though, and Girlfriend number three's family can no longer make the trip.

They do not get married that year on a warm September day in a lighthouse in Sicily.

That, however, is not where this story ends. The following Christmas, he announces that he and Girlfriend number three will be celebrating their beloved union in Madagascar. His plans getting ever grander and more far-fetched as time goes on, he tells of a two-week celebration, all expenses covered. A village with a concert performed by a celebrity band. Private flights, lodgings, the whole damn village, privatised. Bold statement for someone who does not even pay rent.

He keeps pushing the date back, until one day, he brings another girl to Christmas, claiming that she is just a friend, coming because Girlfriend number three is with her own family and will come over Easter. We can call this girl Girlfriend number three point five. Not only because they share a name, but also because she behaves like his girlfriend.

The kicker? He and the mother of his son are not yet divorced.

Disenchantment. It begins gradually, as I start to recognise that his outrageous stories are outrageous for one very precise reason: they are lies. When I first said that Pisa brings his crazy stories, I meant that they were fun, and nothing I had ever heard. The accounts of his Swedish adventures never ceased to amaze me, to impress me.

Marked by the first story at which my brain sounded the alarm, my disenchantment ends by the time I am in high school, leaving in its place the beginnings of what will be the rotten deterioration

of betrayal. My first seed of doubt is planted by a story too far-fetched – too *inverosimile* – to be believed. Even for my naïve self. He recounts the story of a university exam.

He tells me, around the time I had exams, that he, too, had to sit them. That he, in his university days, studied English and Swedish. He tells of his exams, that they were public, his oral exams. But the one he really wants to tell me about is an English oral: cousin let me tell you a crazy story. Back when I was in university, I also had oral exams. Awful as they were, public and all, my favourite one was an English oral. Did you know that one time, I did an oral exam, I spoke great Swedish the whole way through, I answered every question that was asked of me. The crazy thing though? At the end of the exam, though, my professor turned to me and said: that was great, man. It would just be even better if you could repeat all of that. In English this time.

I awkwardly laughed at this, looking at my sister strangely out of the corner of my eye. I took a deep breath, hesitated, and then asked him. Did you pass?

Of course I did, he replied.

I knew it then, and I know now, that this could never happen. That even if in an unfortunate turn of events, one would, indeed, answer a question given in English supported by a class given in English and in front of your English professors, in another language, that they would, at the very least, stop you before long.

Gone. That's where I want him to be. Gone from my grandma's flat.

Perhaps the juiciest part of this story lies within the walls of my late grandmother's Pisa apartment. The one in which every single previous story mentioned here took place. The one which marked my childhood with some of the best Italian memories.

He comes home from Sweden just before the outbreak of COVID-19, all happy because he got custody of his son. After an endless battle, he said. He goes to visit my grandmother; says he wants to spend the weekend. He stays until Christmas and plans to go back to Sweden, but lockdown. So he stays.

My grandmother lets him, of course, it's just temporary after all.

He uses her credit card, no consent given, of course, because why would he even ask? It gets more and more frequent, with more and more money being taken, grocery lists becoming suspiciously long, and mysterious sums on her bank statements. So, we decide to deactivate her credit card. My grandmother, in any case, prefers using cash. Things around the house gradually go missing after this. Starting with my grandmother's belongings, then my aunt's, then my mother's.

He says that he is going to leave. The following month he has an appointment with the notary,

moving into a flat in the city centre worth six million. The following month comes and goes, with no appointment and the purchase falling through, with all the money lost, naturally. This happens again. And again. And again. For years. One day, when his son begs him to move back to Genoa for his health, he says no. Then yes, he finds another flat, also worth millions, of course, and he tells everyone that he's moving away. No one believes him, not anymore. Not even his son. Not after years of lies and broken promises, a true testament to the boy who cried wolf. And naturally, they don't go.

Half a decade later, himself and his son are still living in my grandmother's flat. After she went to a retirement home, they stayed. After she passed away, he stayed. After the flat was sold, he stayed. Despite the lawyers, he stays. Never once giving anything in return. Yet still, things around the flat go missing. He asked Girlfriend number four and her daughter to move in with him. Allegedly, she is a dermatologist with a practice.

Like an imperfect cadence, this story is incomplete. It thrives not in its conclusion, but in the anticipation of what is to come. If it comes at all. In my mind, this story will end when I cut ties. When going back to Pisa will mean not potentially running into him. This story will reach completion when balance is restored. When he leaves her flat vacant, as it should have always been. His departure – this story's end – is to be on the

– Anonymous

THE ELEPHANT AMONG PEOPLE

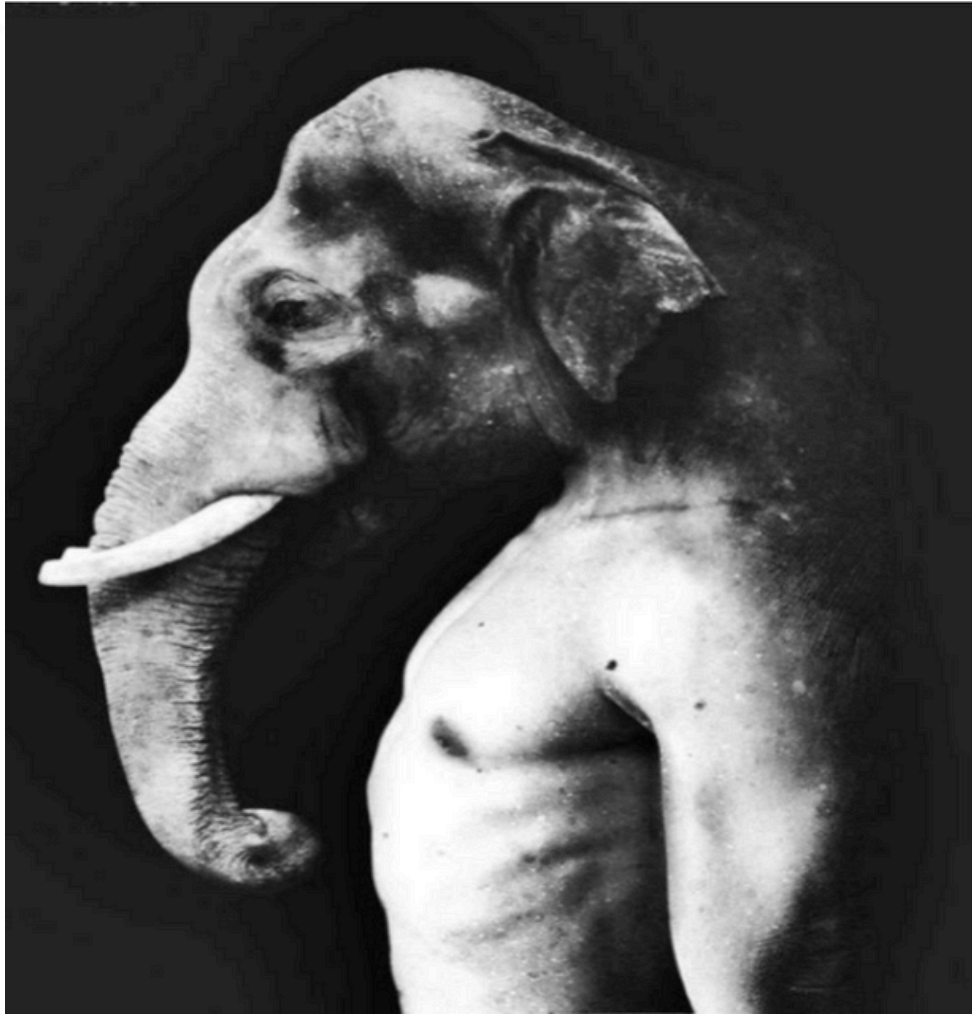


Image from COSMOS by @Francesco Sambo

Note to the reader

If you've ever felt like you didn't belong anywhere, then this essay is for you. I'll talk about what it's like to feel out of place and how overwhelming typical situations can be.

I myself am autistic and ever since I was a child, I've always felt out of place. Like something was wrong with me. I just couldn't fit in anywhere and even if I tried and somehow succeeded, I consumed my energy due to masking and couldn't keep up for long.

Family never felt like home. School felt like a performance, always trying to keep up with others. Out in public I felt huge but at the same time so small and invisible. I thought everyone was staring and judging me, and that they could see that I'm different, which made my legs shaky and my walk wobbly.

Dear reader, if you've ever felt like that or still feel like it, then I want you to know, it's okay. Trust me, you are doing just fine. You are not weird, nor different. And even if you are different, is that really a bad thing? Wouldn't it be lame if every person was the same?

I am proud of you. You are worthy.
You are safe.

Let me take you to a moment where that overwhelming feeling took over.

Maybe life just isn't meant for me.

This feeling of not belonging anywhere, like an elephant in a crowded room. Feeling out of place wherever I go, never knowing where I'm supposed to be.

Don't you occasionally feel like this? Don't you feel your heart aching for belonging? Don't you feel your heart racing, your hands shaking, your head pounding and can't you hear your thoughts screaming?

„You don't belong anywhere.“

„You're embarrassing.“

„You're a burden.“

I try to keep a conversation going, but these thoughts make it hard for me to continue. I remain silent, like I always do. I stay in the group so I don't look uninterested. Why is it so loud?

I look around and only now realize how full the dining hall has become. Full of people. Full of noises I can't seem to cope with.

I hear bits and pieces from different conversations. Someone's unhappy with their math grade, another has a crush, and someone else is talking about her plans for the weekend. I wonder what her plans are, but I can't hear the rest since my head is too full. The lights are starting to get way too bright. Has it always been this bright?

I try to remain calm. To remain normal. I stay in the group so I won't seem rude. Why is everyone so close to me? Why is my sweater suddenly so itchy?

I feel like I'm floating. I know my friends can see me, but I wish they didn't. I pretend I'm fine.

„Are you okay?“ my friend next to me asks. I nod. I give her a smile, but I don't think I did because I can't really feel my body. It feels like it doesn't belong to me. Like someone took it away and left me with my empty self.

The bell rings and we get back to class. After ten minutes of holding myself together, I ask to go to the bathroom. The hallway stretches, endless. And then the bathroom floor — cold, hard, and somehow safe.

I find myself staring at the grey wall before I sink into myself and break down. Suddenly I feel so small.

All this, just to fit in. To act normal. To pretend I belong somewhere. But maybe I was right all along. Maybe I don't belong anywhere, and life just isn't meant for me.

I get up, look at myself in the mirror, wipe my tears away so I don't look like I just had a breakdown, smile to my mirrored self and step back into class.

Even if I always feel out of place, like the elephant among people, I'll keep going. Because maybe one day, I'll find my place too.

– J.P.

The Jewels

TW: miscarriage, incest, murder

One day, there would be no water left. One day, deserted dunes under the inescapable heat of the sun would be all that would remain, amidst the vastness and the nothing. The day the last drop would evaporate into the air, there would already be no-one left to watch it fade.

One day, not long after that last drop would have risen to the sky, joined a forming cloud, and rained over a riverboat carrying a few slightly charred and smoking people who were wondering how in the Night they had ended up right there, armies would pass through that emptiness, populating it once again, if only for a brief moment; and after that, the dunes would only sense the echoes of the storms that shook the human world in those following times, far away from them.

No passing soldier would notice the ruins.

But before all that, in this exact spot in the middle of a desert between those precise yet indistinguishable dunes, there was water, and with it, everything that water brings: vegetation, which grew from arid into luxuriant bushes and trees and bore flowers with varied sweet scents, which in turn brought in a range of otherwise unknown insects. Some were bright and colourful, either to signal a danger of poison or to attract a mate, while nature gave others dark shades to hide among the rare and precious shadows. With the insects came birds, which made prey for bigger animals, and a few centuries later one could hardly believe that this big an “everything“ could turn into an absolute “nothing“ so quickly, so drastically, and without anybody ever finding out.

Finally, after all this had already been there a while, a group of humans came – the Singer knows what they were doing in the middle of the desert – and decided that it was, while it lasted, a good enough a place to settle down. Some house-building and environment management later, and the setting for this story was, well, set.

The oasis never had a proper name; the only people who knew about it were those who lived there, and since there was no other oasis in the vicinity with which they could confuse theirs, they never saw the point of naming it.

It is on the edge of that very nameless oasis that she was waiting, hidden under a pontoon and yet visible from the other side of the water – she knew this, and did not like it, in fact she hated the thought so much that she periodically retreated further and further back under the wooden structure in a desperate hope to merge with the shadows, even when it was physically impossible to hide further than she already was. The sun was only starting to go down, so she pulled her thick bushy hair down over the sides of her face, hiding her orange glass dangly earrings to avoid any reflection catching one of them and betraying her presence.

Kaffi curled and uncurled her toes in the sand; her legs were brought painfully up close to her chest, so much so that her feet had started sliding out of the front of her sandals. A splash made her raise her head, but it was only a ghost-fish.

Why, on the billions of bilious blistering barnacles that covered the blasted rocks, had she agreed to help him?

The wood of the pier above her head groaned, and she frowned at it; yes, she knew perfectly why she had agreed, she needed not be reminded, thank you very much. In case the wood hadn't understood, it was a rhetorical question, Night-dammit.

She uncurled a hand from her blue skirt and resumed biting her nails. She had tried singing inside her head, like Mama Vihi had taught her, but she could not focus on her voice and bring it out over the mass of other thoughts that were flying and bouncing around in her skull.

What, in the name of the Dancer, the Singer and all the Music in-between, was he doing?
As if in response, the wood groaned again, but this time in a pattern. Footsteps, right above her head.

‘K?’

She let out a sigh of relief, unfolding her sore legs.

‘Down here.’

Lazyr clambered down from the pier until he was crouching against the light of the still scorching setting sun.

‘You do know,’ he said as he crawled underneath the pier, ‘that you look even more suspicious if you cower in the shadows, don’t you?’

‘You’re late,’ she scoffed.

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

‘Did she...?’

He nodded, sitting at her side. ‘We just have one thing to do in exchange for the stone.’

Kaffi groaned. Of course their “helper” wouldn’t just do it for free.

‘What does she want and, more importantly, why can’t she do it herself?’

As he slowly stopped blinking to adjust his eyes to the semi-obscure, she noticed that he hadn’t quite managed to hide his dark circles with the face-paint this time.

‘She wants five fire-stars.’

Kaffi blinked. ‘That’s it?’

Lazyr shrugged; a few of his shoulder-long braids had escaped the attempted ponytail. ‘Apparently. I didn’t ask what she needed them for.’

She nodded, her hands clenching into fists. ‘Then let’s do it now. The faster the better; we don’t have long.’

They cautiously emerged from under the palm-wood pontoon and started shedding their clothing. Both bare-chested, they waded into the oasis until their feet couldn’t reach the bottom anymore. Kaffi dove first.

This time, she could focus. She sang in her head, and the water shuddered slightly around her as she drew in a few breaths; the Song of the Depths had been one of the first she had mastered as a young child, giving away the future talent that would get her into Mama Vihi’s classes, the future talent that would save her life.

Her sister had not been so lucky.

As she went further and further down, savouring the sunless coolness of the water, she glanced back at Lazyr.

Without this whole plot, he also may have suffered the same fate as Navani.

She reached back and grabbed his hand, sharing her Song with him so he could breathe too.

She spotted an unmistakable reddish glow behind a submerged boulder and spun around it. It was a group of a dozen starfish, which looked like they were on fire, that was trying to retreat into a crack between some rocks and hide from their view – but giving themselves away with their unmistakable orange luminescence.

Kaffi turned to Lazyr and motioned at a big water-fern nearby; he nodded and let go of her hand, swimming in its direction, while she descended onto the fire-stars. He returned with a few freshly plucked wide leaves. They grabbed hands again, she let him draw a few breaths, and they set to work, him holding the leaves open and her herding the stars into them. They managed to get five in total in two separate leaves, and so, each carrying a tightly-knotted leaf-bag, they swam back to the surface.

Lazyr coughed for a moment when they emerged. Kaffi saw that they had drifted somewhat away from their point of departure and were now bobbing not far from a rock formation which created some small creek-within-a-creek; giggles bubbled up from behind the rocks, and Kaffi caught sight of some long, unbound hair and floating flowers.

As she quickly made to swim away, grabbing Lazyr with her, a voice rose.

‘Well, hello there, Bluefish.’

Kaffi cursed under her breath. ‘Hello, Daryan. What do you want?’

She turned around as fast as the water allowed her and glared at the older woman, who looked at her and Lazyr with a sickening faked affection, swarmed by an entourage of equally-naked and equally-trying-not-to-laugh girls.

‘Oh, nothing,’ Daryan smiled, water adorning her black locks with moving pearls. ‘Just to say your name. Bluefish, Bluefish...’

She smacked her lips. Kaffi sighed.

‘Come on, Laz. This is useless.’

‘Oh, hi, Stumble,’ Daryan called out as if she hadn’t noticed Lazyr until then. ‘Aren’t you rehearsing for tonight’s show? I wouldn’t want to blow it again, if I were you; my uncle was already pretty mad last time, but I managed to convince him you could improve.’ She grinned. ‘The least you could do is prove me right.’

‘Don’t listen,’ Kaffi told him as she dragged him away. ‘Don’t listen.’

‘I told your sister the same thing, you know, Bluefish!’ Daryan called out, propping herself up on a rock, her grin poisonous and wide. ‘A shame she can’t tell Stumble the price she paid for not listening!’

‘One day,’ Kaffi whirled around, clutching her leaf-bag against her chest and thrusting her finger into the air as if she were jabbing it in the other woman’s chest. ‘One day, you’ll decompose, Daryan. And I’ll be there to watch it happen.’

As the ruler’s niece and her hens exploded in laughter, Kaffi pulled Lazyr away and they swam back to shore. Her hand brushed against the blade she had had strapped to her leg since her and Lazyr had agreed on the plan.

That might happen sooner than you think.

They swam back to shore, where they had left their meagre clothing in a pile under the pontoon. Water kept leaking through the cracks in the leaf-bags, and they couldn’t let the fire-stars die, so they dressed quickly and bowed their heads when they walked out into the street. The wind towers threw shadows on the ground, keeping the houses as well as the narrow paths cool, with vegetation filling the gaps.

Kaffi would know; the house, before she lost it, had belonged to her sister, after both their parents died the same way Navani had. Kaffi had not been of age back then, so she knew the streets and how to navigate the shadows in them. Mama Vihi had housed her for a moment, but the small space had not been enough for one more bed. Kaffi had come to like the night outside, the only moment when one would not roast alive to serve as the purple vultures’ next meal, once she had bought her Song of Protection – she would have to ask her how much she wanted for a refill, by the way.

She was lucky her store was exactly where they were going.

Lazyr, fearing recognition from a group of the ruler’s handmaidens at the shell market, gripped her hand; Kaffi navigated the crowd until they emerged from it. They made their way through increasingly narrow and dark alleys, sand coating their exposed and humid feet.

By the time they reached the last turn, which took them underneath a bridge between two ruined houses – Kaffi had slept in one of them, once, but could not stand the amount of rock dove faeces and its smell –, the sun had almost disappeared.

They came to a stop in front of a boulder twice their height and four times their width. Kaffi closed her eyes, knowing Lazyr would follow suit, and they stepped around the chunk of rock which had been un-sanded by the settlers when they were building their canals. One, two, three, four steps ahead, one hand on its ruined but smooth surface, then one, two on the left around a jagged knob, then one, two, three more ahead. They stopped again and reopened their eyes.

In front of them, in the rock itself, stood a door.

Lazyr stepped forward, his breath coming in short. He who used to race Kaffi all the way around the entire oasis was exhausted after a few minutes of fast-paced walking.

He knocked.

The door opened. They slid through it, hearing a shuffle of cloth and a tingling of items.

‘Come in, come in,’ a voice croaked. ‘Don’t be shy. Would you care for a maribond? A pearl of light? A blind eye?’

They were now in the shop they knew well, every inch of space covered in all sorts of trinkets, herbs, filled jars, dried insects, twisting flowers, floating marbles, half-invisible cloth, illuminated by candles hanging over the ground – the Singer knew how they remained lit in mid-air; Kaffi did not want to find out.

The creature rounded the corner, a faceless heap of cloth upon cloth with two arms and hands wrinkled like rotting wet wood jutting out of them; in each palm was a perfectly round hole.

‘We brought what you wanted,’ Lazyr spoke, setting down his leaf-bag. Kaffi followed suit.

‘Ah, perfect, perfect indeed! As promised, your reward for your deed.’

The creature shuffled away, digging through a pile of what seemed to be rubbish until it extracted a wooden cabinet. She opened one of its drawers and drew out two thumb-sized vials, containing a swirling coloured essence. One was pitch black, punctuated with white sparkles, the other almost transparent with pinkish reflections. Slamming the cabinet shut again, the creature skittered back towards them and dropped the vials in Lazyr’s hands.

‘There you go. Now out, quick, quick. You have little time until the night is thick.’

Kaffi’s eyes widened when Lazyr handed her the pink vial. ‘But this is...’ she looked at the creature. ‘What must I pay you?’

She waved her holed hand in the air dismissively, retreating back into shadows.

‘There’s no need, dearie, no need; it is enough that you will make him bleed.’

Kaffi looked down at her new, full vial of Song of Protection. ‘Thank you...’

When she looked back up, the shop had disappeared, and they were standing in front of the boulder again.

‘Come on,’ Lazyr whispered. ‘She’s right; we don’t have much time.’

With one look back, Kaffi followed him.

They ran back the way they had come; the sun had now dropped behind the line of the dunes and night had spilled in the sky like from the neck of a tipped-over bottle of dark jabba ink. Torches were being lit against the walls, the highest fires of all surrounding the biggest house in the settlement. Up through the widest street, a stream of young people, clothed in orange and white, walked up towards it. None of them spoke, except for a few murmurs from the ones who were wondering who would die tonight.

Lazyr removed the hood of his cloak; he was clothed the same way as all the others. Kaffi huddled by his side, trying to attract as little attention as possible; but none of the Dancers paid her any heed. They had bigger things to worry about.

She brushed his arm.

‘Are you worried?’ she whispered.

He gave her a tired but playful smile. ‘Are you chickening out on me, K? Who knew the fierce and proud Singer could get cold feet?’

‘Laz, I’m serious. This – what we’re going to do – is serious.’

His smile faded and he looked down. ‘I know. But so is everything else. I know you want to do this for Navani, and we will.’

‘I’m not doing it only for her,’ she nuanced; they exchanged a smile. ‘But yes; what we’re doing it for is worse. It’s worth it. He exhausted the last Dancer to death yesterday; there won’t be another one tonight.’

She clenched her fists, and he smiled again. ‘There’s the K I know.’

They were nearing the entrance to the palace; quickly, Kaffi unlatched the knife she had strapped to her thigh and discreetly placed it in his hand.

‘I’ll wait for your signal.’

They pressed each other’s fingers before letting go.

Kaffi stepped away from the column of dancers and vanished into the darkness, along the path between the palm trees they had scouted nights before. Shedding most of her clothes and hiding them under a flowering bush, she swiftly emerged from along a stream into a pool where young women she had never seen were bathing; adopting a submissive smile, she breezed past them, barely raising their attention, and slid around a column.

Peeking around it, she saw she was exactly where she wanted to be, on the edge of the Dancing Hall; she could see the long table of the privileged, their luxurious food and the gems they didn’t share, and the ruler and his candid and fleshy visage turned towards the Dancers in front of him in the midst of a frenzy of limbs and jumps and flourishes of clothing and of long strings at the ends of which knives were attached. The Dance of Blades. Usually executed with non-sharp weapons, Lazyr now had one that was very sharp – sharp enough to slice someone’s throat.

She spotted him, slowly moving closer to the ruler.

That was it, then. Laz and her, they were going to kill him.

She waited, her fingers opening the little vial containing the most forbidden of all Songs – the Song of the Night.

On cue, Lazyr stumbled, falling very close to the ruler.

Kaffi tilted the vial and poured the Song out of its cage.

Over in the dunes, Banuur was waiting, slowly un-braiding her hair, savouring the feeling of every strand coming loose to rest against her caramel-skinned neck. Her white camel was nibbling the base of a very thorny cactus behind her. There was another plant, not far from there, a little waist-high dried tree bearing tiny red flowers; but she had forbidden Varni – her camel – to eat it. It marked the spot where a cursed treasure was buried.

‘Don’t worry, my nammi-na,’ she murmured towards the little stone under the tree. ‘Mama is going to kill your dada, and then all will be fine.’

She closed her eyes and breathed in the gust of wind that was thrown over the dunes and into her face, finishing her job of undoing her braid, making her gemstone earrings knock against her skull, bringing goosebumps to her skin. Grains of sand had lodged themselves between her eyelashes as she twirled her fingers around the chain of the pendant around her neck which plunged into her red dress and between her breasts; she could feel the coolness of the vial at its end, not quite warmed despite being pressed to her body.

She had traded that Song of Revenge for twelve of her gold necklaces; the ruler had given them to her, she didn't care about them in the slightest.

She looked down at the bow and arrow resting between her legs and smiled.

I'm going to kill him, my nammi-na. That's what happens now.

The night sky over her head, as was the norm in the desert, did not bear a single cloud. Stars glimmered like diamond dust, powdered across the entire vault, and she was alone beneath it, one small fragment of its obsidian fallen from the high untouchable dark vault.

She pulled the long pendant out from between her breasts; there was something else hung there with the Song of Revenge: a jewel, a red stone that had once been the core of the most prized piece of rock that one could find in the desert: a sand heart. He had chosen it for her, had it smoothed and polished and shaped into a real heart. Every day since he had given it to her, she had worn it; every day, she had sharpened its tip until it had turned into a puncturing spike.

Smiling, she removed it from the golden chain and held it in her palm. With the other hand, she opened the little vial and poured the Song on the stone; a few fumeroles of it flew up in the night, quickly dispersed by the cold breeze, but the rest laced itself around the jewel and tied itself to it.

With the string that had once held her hair in place, she took the lethal jewel and fastened it to the tip of her arrow.

Its red reminded her of the blood. The blood that had flowed from between her legs that excruciating night, the only night of rain they had gotten that year; she had not been able to get up and feel the rain. She had not been able to see the flowers bloom across the dunes, covering everything in pink and purple as far as one could see for a single day until the desert became desert again. Instead, she had been busy going in and out of consciousness in her bed as a malformed, unfinished, still-born child had been forced out of her body.

The only flowers she had seen were the ones her maids had picked to lay on the child's grave, the ones which had shed seeds into the sand, one of which had then grown into the small tree beside which she was sitting.

Everything had been his fault. Everything would have been fine if he hadn't loved her as he did. If he hadn't come to visit her on so many nights when he should have been with one of his many mistresses. If he hadn't fathered a child in her, she might not have wanted to kill the ruler in this exact moment.

But he had, and so she did.

She raised her bow and nocked the arrow on the string.

She stood.

The city lights were distant, but her Song of Revenge would not fail; it would make sure the arrow would find its target and strike.

She drew the bow back, locking the muscles in her back and shoulders and arms into position, holding her breath.

Die.

She let go of everything.

The arrow flew, ruthless and true, through the diamond-speckled night, through the flame-lit city, over the diamond-reflecting oasis, through an open window between a flap of the rich curtains, and sank into flesh.

Banuur felt the echo of the impact run like a shiver from her toes to the top of her skull. She smiled, dropped her bow beside her and laid back in the sand, hands behind her head, gazing upwards. She squinted, blurring darkness and light between her eyelashes.

'I wonder which star you are,' she whispered to the little tree right beside her; her lips barely moved when she spoke.

Hours went by her, along with the moon and the stars until the distant haze of dawn started pouring over the edges of the dunes. Banuur didn't close her eyes once, except to blink, and she often forgot to do that – she was too busy thinking, savouring her newfound freedom, realising that she could now start thinking about what came next, and realising as well that that was out of her hands. Evanah would take all the decisions.

Only when the light was too strong for anyone to remain asleep underneath it did she stand up, walk over to Varni – who *had* been sleeping – and climbed on her back, and white camel and its rider descended the dunes. She did not bother to hide her face when they approached the gates, let alone when she reached the palace doors.

The guards were the first ones to stop her. She heard Daryan crying before they spoke:

'Your father, my lady... He died.'

Banuur feigned surprise, a jolt, she sent a shiver of shock down her hair, her hands flying over her mouth to fake horror and hide the smile of realised liberation that was spreading there.

'The ruler died?'

'Yes, the ruler, your father.'

Banuur's chest, without the weight of both the stone and the Song, felt as light as a soaring bird.

'How did he die?'

Evanah suppressed one final gag and rose up from the edge of the sink. The translucid white silk she wore like a pair of folded wings fluttered in the breeze that entered from between the open curtains.

She turned her back to the mirror and gazed upon the room around her. The bed was perfectly made, but she could only see the hands of the maids in that action; he never made the bed. Sometimes she tried to help the maids, but he would always laugh at her for doing that. The table was covered in papers and matters unsolved; they were better left unsolved than solved by him. The ink pot had been tipped over, drenching what looked like a union contract and a death notice. A bouquet of flowers was still smoking its heavy scent into the room, stuffy and obsessive; that was why Evanah had opened the windows. There were clothes abandoned, empty, across the floor, in heaps of unmatched colours, jewels scattered between them. Jewels. Always jewels. More jewels. She still believed that was all she had ever been to him: another necklace, one he perhaps considered his favourite because he wore it nearly every day.

Oh, she had been worn; inside and out.

Until she had had enough of it. Of him using people like that. Like his jewels. The maids, the Dancers, the women, the entire town. It was all a decoration that he chose every morning to go with his mood more than with his outfit. She had grown tired of being his favourite necklace but

having to wear his hands as a pendant, strangling her own throat every night.

She knew he would want to kiss her that night, but the poison in her lipstick had been there since the afternoon, just to be sure the job would be finished by the end of the night. She had also ingested some, of course, much against her will and more because of the intrusions of his tongue against hers. But she believed she had gotten it all out now.

Her neck itched. She grabbed her seashell comb and reached behind her head, gathering the massive bush of curly brown hair that cascaded down to the curve of her back, and she tried to gather it up as best she could, exposing the marks around her throat, slightly darker than her skin. Hand-shaped.

Her eyes were dry. Daryan was the only one who had cried all night, and hardly anyone actually believed she meant it.

Evanah heard a shuffle of feet at the entrance, then silence. She turned around to face the little maid that had appeared, perhaps thirteen, perhaps younger, but old enough to know to avoid this room in the late hours of night if she did not want to her women crying and screaming.

‘Madam?’

Evanah forced a smile, with which one remaining gag rose. ‘Yes, dear?’

‘What... What are your orders?’

The smile deepened, and she did not have to force it this time. She walked to the window, her white dress lazily trailing her footsteps; the town lay below, golden and white, nestled among dunes, all around the glittering oasis and the miraculous vegetation around it. For once, the sky looked blue to her, truly blue, and not just scathing. She finally saw the sun as a piece of gold nestled in pale sapphire sheets rather than a cursed stone.

She had been the closest to the ruler; much closer than Banuur, understandably so, and much closer than Banuur’s late mother.

The decision was hers.

‘We’re leaving.’

The maid shuffled closer. ‘Pardon?’

Evanah turned, smiling as if she were holding a diamond between her lips.

‘We’re leaving. Gather everyone, tell them to gather all they have and can carry. This town has seen too many things; it’s time we returned to Karella.’

There was almost no water left.

The creature stood still by the side of the tiny pool that was left of the oasis. With the water gone, the plants had died, the insects had died, and the mammals had moved elsewhere. The everything would soon be nothing.

‘Remaining makes no sense,’ she told the water. ‘I will soon be needed... somewhere else.’

And with that, she was gone, and the last drop of water evaporated.

– **Mel Riverwood**

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Happy holidays and good luck to everyone with any exams or assignments !

Love,
the MUSE Team



“To be afraid is the condition of loving knowledge. Were I not dying of fear, I’d not know how to exist myself, I wouldn’t get the notices of existence, I wouldn’t record with delight the miniscule passage of a blue tit, its wing dipped in gold on the dusk. Were I not dying of sorrow I wouldn’t with nostalgia be present at the creation of the world, the squirrel nuptials this morning I wouldn’t care. Creatures are born to a backdrop of adieux.”

– Hélène Cixous