MARROW



Owen Carswell

Marrow

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I

You, I know you not. You are a stranger in my eyes and yet a mirror in my memory. I still see you sometimes. Not in my waking hours, but in the depths of a dream where I cannot recognize anything but your touch. I'm falling. I'm failing to see why I'm slipping below the currents and into your arms. It's not a choice anymore. There was a time when I could suppress the thought of you and turn towards the chaos of waking life. Maybe I still can, maybe I still do. The chaos persists, people speak, I brush arms with the occasional stranger and friend, but the pain of your presence has grown into the comfort of your evocation. When I sleep at night in this bed designed for one, I remember the days we made room for two. There's always a distraction, always a debt unpaid, always a voice unheard, and yet still in the marrow of my dream I fall back into you, enveloped in your dissipating presence. I alienate myself, the chaos persists, the noise of waking hours is deafening, it is only in the silence of viscous, cumbersome dreams that I can submerge into the thought of us. The more times I do so, the more hedonistic my pleasures of nighttime bliss become, the more I misrecognize what was, and what I'm choosing to remember. You too are slipping deeper below the currents, the older I get the deeper I must descend into the viscous pool of my dreams to find you. The deeper I go the more I fear I won't be able to ascend back up. Every time I descend, more of myself gets lodged into the thick matter of my unconscious. Will I continue to dive down in hopes of seeing you just one more time? For I know anytime I do so, I will not want it to be my last.

My indulgence feels unprecedented. In memories woven into dreams you are unchanged, untouched, untethered. I'm enthralled in all that was once at fingertips, free of hesitation. Not questioning to call out your name, to speak earnestly, to expose my

vulnerabilities. In my dream I can do such, but with no reciprocation. I see you, not as a stranger, once again as a mirror. You see me and smile, yet you cannot act. The limits of my imagination restrict you. I see you clearly and yet you misrecognize me. Yet it is my own misrecognition eroding the memory to which I have descended which prevents me from imagining you speaking to me. I fail to remember your voice, your tonality, your quips. All that remains here is your physicality. I wish so much to speak to you, only to hear a response. It matters not the question at hand, but only the serenade of your voice, yet even that feels like nothing but a distant echo, reverberating off the walls of my psyche. Yet I remain unable to discern its origin.

Like condensation upon a window, I gaze out at you, your form becomes more obscured. I see only the traces of your figure and the idea of your laugh as sound penetrates through glass. The medium through which I see you grows opaque. I can only mediate fragments of you through this dream, I can never have you in your totality. There is a lack, and a subsequent desire. Yet I can recognize the growing disconnect between what you are, and what you were as I remember you. This schism is apparent through my own. We perceive through change. Through the passage of time we understand temporality, through the length of our saunter we discern distance, and through the reflection of our mirrors we can see a figure both eerily strange as they are familiar. We've alienated ourselves through our actions inciting change. Our choices compose the paint upon our canvases, you, a stain upon my soul.

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I know not if I am still dreaming. My fictitious embrace of you has never felt more real, and yet I know your touch is but a mere deception. My eyes are open, I am in my room, I am in this bed. The window above my head projects a gestalt of fluttering light, visible on the wall I stare into from this mattress. The light is

glimmering like the reflection of ripples on a lake. The light speaks for itself. It moves where it desires, there is no pattern, there is no thought behind action. Despite its chaos, it nevertheless illuminates the room. I feel unwell. I close my eyes and refrain from withholding this gaze, I crane my neck backwards and swallow the saliva ponding in my mouth. This brings about the sensation of a very dry throat, I feel the stinging of my pharynx, inflammation, and soreness. My arm creeps out from under itchy wool blankets, it feels the sweat upon my forehead. The burgeoning sensation of damp skin rises to my attention as I feel the sweat upon my neck and chest, which has been partially soaked up by my shirt while I slept. I feel unwell. My body aches and I resist thought. My eyes peak once again at the light projected upon my wall, the squint of my vision only intensifies the refraction of the light. Light unwavering, it persists in its movement. And yet, through this chaos, it is silent. The room is silent. I fail to know why the light moves as it does, there are no clues. Following a moment of delegated thought, I grin.

'Maybe there is a tree outside, maybe it's in front of the window above me, and light is forced to weave through branches and leaves to make it into this room.'

My wry expression draws my attention back to the ache of my neck and my smile ceases.

'What if there's a great wind pressing upon the tree? Forcing it to tremble as its roots grip tightly the soil. Branches waver the oncoming intensity of breath, such a movement lets light sneak through in different angles. This must be why I see light upon my wall, moving in the form it does.'

And yet, would I not certainly hear the howl from above my head too? How could I see such intense movement while it remains so silent. All that can be heard is my own complexion as I draw heavy breaths and my stomach churns under the wool blankets. I choose

to suspend my judgment, I fail to be certain of what my eyes perceive. What supersensible essence could be discerned when my senses fail to not contradict? Furthermore, why bother with an explanation anyways? A valid understanding ascertained through perception of sense or supersensibility would prove to have no difference. Both would affirm the same phenomena, neither is sufficient to do so. If anything, the mere act of my mind's deduction of thought proves understanding is the activity of my own consciousness. The truths of the external become more apparent the further inward I gaze at my own mind. I feel unwell.

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I fail to move, the aches of my complexion overbear my wills and I remain static. As I lay in this bed I am the solipsistic thought held within these walls. I cannot be certain of this light I behold, I cannot be certain of the bed in which I lay. I am a hungry mind. I desire understanding, to have my thoughts sated, to have my consciousness affirmed. I wince, realizing that it is only through you that I can affirm myself. Through your gaze I have lost myself in you, while also superseding you, becoming myself. Only through my descent into the viscous pool of that dream can I do such. I'm overwhelmed by the desire to do so. I close my eyes again and pray that I will slip below the current and once again into your arms. I wish to be a rock, cast into a lake, sinking to the floor of sand. And yet my body keeps me afloat, drifting upon the chaotic currents of the water.

I must be made of pumice, my mind porous. It's only through the dissipation of my thoughts like volcanic gases trapped in air holes, can the rock begin to sink below the surface. An exhaustion of thoughts, succumbing to sleep I find myself descending once again into your pleasurable dream. My hedonism has no bounds. In sleep I desire you, in my wake, more than just you. I lay in this bed, desiring you to nurse me back to health. Affirm my consciousness

through your gaze, tilt my head up and pour the saucer of milk down my throat. Place the cigarette between my lips and light it. I cannot do so myself, for I feel unwell.

You enter from the door to my left, your white dress refracts light as you pass through the middle of the room. My glasses are fogged over, I only see your figure. The room remains silent, I hear not even your footsteps. Slowly you move towards the bedframe, to my right you stand. I fail to crane my neck in your direction, overcome with aches I remain as I was. Your hand creeps into view as you kneel down, running your fingers down my forearm. The soft touch of your hand feels like warm water from the faucet. Despite your proximity, I fail to hear your breath. Your hand interlocks mine, I fail once again to turn my head and yet I know you peer directly into my physiognomy.

I've sunken to the floor. I'm deep in the viscous marrow once more.

II

I've awoken from the marrow of that dream to find everything exactly as it was, exactly as it has always been. My room unchanged, drapes flowing softly as the slight breeze from outside my window gently enters the room. Dust gathers on top of surfaces, and around objects littered throughout my room. These possessions are exactly that, mere objects. What makes them mine beyond me simply having *bought* them? Without a doubt a laughable amount of my possessions are not unique in the slightest. I'm certain just about any other tenant has a few glasses in their cupboards, a few napkins on their table, probably a bar of soap on their sink. All of which being objects of such insignificance that if one or two were to go missing, I doubt they would even notice. The same couldn't be assumed for objects of

noted significance however, like an heirloom. If a woman were to lose her grandma's diamond necklace, without a doubt she would search frantically, retrace her steps, and if still unsuccessful, probably file a police report if she suspected foul play. Would it not cross her mind to just walk down to the jeweler and buy another necklace? To place it exactly where the previous one laid and get on with her day? No, she probably wouldn't do such a thing, would she? Evidently the value lies behind simply the carat of the diamond. Beyond the simple appearance of it, the *object-for-itself* holds greater significance now. Its relation to other objects, other people, other places, had culminated in it becoming symbolic in one way or another. Its value reaches beyond the object-in-itself. Me? I have no such objects. Their value remains on the level of utility, what I can get out of them is my only concern. And yet, it is still hard for me to lay here on my bed and glance at the glass of water on my nightstand, and not remember watching you place it up to your lips and sip the water down, leaving an imprint of red smears where the glass and your lips met. Yes, maybe my 'possessions' are insignificant now, interchangeable with anyone else's for all I care, but at least then I could take pride in knowing they had utility which reached beyond me. Yes, even if I was nothing more than a dolt laying upon this mattress, at least I could appreciate the fact that my objects, my possessions, as an extension of my being, made me more subsequently useful to you. Herein lies the issue with objects, they can never be anything more than extensions or extremities of one's being. Perhaps sometimes people (like that woman) will rely on the external world to ascribe meaning to an object like a diamond necklace, but also perhaps you can do the inverse. You can adorn yourself in clothes, in jewelry, in objects all the same, simply as a way to 'build yourself up' by hoping the value of these objects reflect something upon you as a result. As a way to try and ascribe some symbolic meaning

to your personhood. It's as if you were to be a peacock, displaying your most stunning feathers to attract a mate. Yes, you could sculpt your image through your extremities to portray yourself in any way you could imagine. But it will only ever be a costume for you to hide your skin under, all as a way for you to strive towards that 'ideal-I' you value so highly, that which you will forever be asymptotically approaching.

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Oh, how I wish to sculpt you into the person I want to be. Your face, your torso, your clothes, all behold me and yet I am the one who dictates your movement. I am the ceramicist, pushing my fingers into the clay which will mold everything that dictates you. And yet, is it not the spinning of the wheel in which the clay rests upon that dictates its form, more so than my thumbs pressing inwards. I shape you, I start by rounding the clay into a vase much like my mother's, but I taper the neck into something different. Temporality as the wheel is what brings about your circularity. I sculpt tirelessly, finally taking my hands off the clay. However, there are still fingerprints upon the surface, I gaze inwards and wonder if the cavity could be taller, wider, longer. I am unsatisfied. I put the clay back upon the wheel and continue sculpting. Hours pass, I mold, contort, and bend form. I see the vase, and yet when I hold it up against the others sitting upon the shelf, it feels incomplete, unresolved. No matter how much I press into the clay, the vase will never be exactly how I see it, it will fail to be the vase of which I desire to make. This lack is potent. I always find an imperfection, a flaw, a failure indicative of my own.

'Is this even a vase?' I think to myself as I gaze inward.

The stature of my being rests upon feet of clay. I consume, I morph, I imagine everything as I want it to be and yet, nothing is ever as I wish. The pumice cast into the lake of my dream has decomposed and become the clay composing my figure. I am

malleable. The viscous, cumbersome dream is no different from the viscosity of my clay feet.

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But what does the form matter when there's an equal lack of utility? The vase remains up in the cupboard with all my other 'possessions.' They've served their purpose, I can't be anything but content with them, but still it's not enough. To be sated, to have my thirst quenched. I have plentiful means to these sorts of ends. Money has never been an issue. In fact, it feels as if all I've been reduced to is just me and my objects. Objects serving as nothing more than temporary distractions. I'm on my porch now, sitting in my chair. A pastry from the bakery around the corner, a cappuccino from next door, a cigarette. I eat, I drink, I smoke, I take in the sunlight from above as I glaze down at the milieu below. I watch a well dressed man dart across the street and towards a woman walking in the opposite direction. He catches up to her and yells out a name. She spins around and jumps into his arms as they laugh and continue down the street together. I chuckle as I sip my cappuccino.

'You really can't find love like that in an object, can you?'

No matter how much you ascribe meaning to it, no matter how symbolic it becomes, it will always be static, it'll always just be there, at your disposal. Means like these aren't supposed to make you happy, maybe I'm just getting ahead of myself, maybe I'm asking too much of them. Yes, they keep you content, or at least they aim to. Caffeine to give you a boost, nicotine to calm your worries, food to give you energy, water to keep you balanced. They're sufficient, hell they're necessary, and yet they can only help you so much. It wouldn't be too hard to abstain from such things, to become thin, mitigate desires and minimize distractions. On the other hand, why not be gluttonous? Pursue nothing but desires, always be full, let your hedonism consume you. You could do

either and still get nowhere. No object will ever affirm you, nothing you wear, nothing you consume, nothing you represent. Stare in the mirror, look into your own eyes and say whatever you are. Say you're strong, say you're smart, say you're pretty, say you're ugly, say you're stupid, hell, say you're real. Say it a million times, eventually you'll pause, you'll turn around to an empty room, an empty apartment, empty hallway, empty street, say it as many times as you want, it will never amount to someone else saying it just once to you.

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We're funny creatures in that way, aren't we? You could truly say you're anything, try and formulate any foundation of your being, of your ideal image, your standard you hold to be true. But if there's no audience, no one to come along and celebrate you in all you are, you aren't really sure of much of anything are you? As your gaze locked on to mine, in an instant I was at once lost in you, and also more myself than I'd ever been before. We affirm one another, together. No one saw me how you did, all gazes differ, from family to friends they all see something different. I must be a selfish creature to desire your gaze if nothing else. It's hard to care too much, we as people have a natural limit on how much affection we can show, how many people we can care about, how many bridges we can not only build, but uphold. Yet, something doesn't sit right with me. I see hardly any use in having 150 relationships (what does Dunbar know?), I'm not a greedy man. Just you, I swear just you at my side to gaze into my eyes as I see yours, affirm one another use my possessions to make me feel useful, let me embrace the fictions of my ideals and rest assured that if nothing else, you'll be there to see it, just to see it, for me to say I'm anything and know that at least you, if no one else heard me. Let me bargain, please, I'd set any wager for just this. Like I said, money has never been a problem. I'd gamble off any possession for

a chance at this fiction I oh so desire. These objects mean nothing to me, I refuse to ascribe meaning because I don't wish for any attachment, I don't want to mourn when they're no longer in my possession. Oh my belongings! Do they belong to me? No. They don't belong anywhere, mere means to whatever ends I need to stay content, to take my mind off the uncomfortable reality that I am, and never will be fully certain of 'myself' when there is no other to meet my gaze or hear my voice. Just an empty apartment, the breeze drifts quietly into the room.

'Another cigarette?' I think to myself.

III

Such thoughts do nothing but cause me to fall backwards, back into the marrow of that dream. It's always easier that way, easier to reject these possessions, reject this room, reject awareness and instead submerge myself in solipsistic thoughts. In this viscous pool I'm stripped of my apprehensions and the lack thereof. My attention is focused on you alone. You, unchanged, yet fully restricted to my imagination. This dream is a haze of possibilities, my mind fights to hold on to the thought of you. You running across the shore on that day in July, you as your lips meet the glass of water on my nightstand. You as you slept on the train, sitting across from me. Or was that on the bus? Was that when we were on our way to visit your parents or when we headed west for that vacation on the coast? You become a smear across my mind, littered wherever my thoughts drift. I deeply fear the reality that these dreams are becoming divulged from truth. I remember, or I think I do? I start to question if my memories serve me correctly? In your absence I'm left with the idea of you, left to draw my own conclusions. My thoughts become contaminated with inconsistencies. My fears, doubts, and insecurities insert

themselves into these memories and they are no longer true to the reference. Oh the irony! Why must my mind fight against itself like this? It's as if my mind is working to forget just as hard as it is trying to remember. It's a battle I know I'll lose and yet I still fight relentlessly. I feel there's honor in dying on this battlefield as opposed to returning from war unvictorious.

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It never lasts forever, my body prevents me from indefinitely remaining in the marrow. Yes, I'm awake again, my room still unchanged. I vastly grab my cigarettes and step back out onto the balcony. The sun is beginning to drop below the horizon. An insurmountable plume of blueish-gray clouds are obscuring the sky, articulated by a radiant hue of orange and pink light erupting from the direction of the sun as it crashes down into the hills. It's truly a beautiful view to behold. Quiet steps and sparse laughter omit from the street below. I gaze down at the park in the distance and see the figures of children playing throughout the grass and trees. Women with strollers yell out names and the little figures freeze and recoil in an instant. Such a sight makes me chuckle, I think about the mothers, then my own. I wonder how she is doing, we haven't spoken in a while. I stretch out my arm to reveal my wrist watch.

'8:30... I could still make the last bus up town if I hurry.'

Without delegation I retreat back inside. I grab the essentials, shoes, wallet, cigarettes, matches, overcoat, and I dart out the door and into the narrow hallway.

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The street is lively despite its barren state. Voices echo from around corners, cars pass by, I peer through windows to see packed bars and full restaurants. Not unusual for a Friday evening, but nonetheless my favorite feeling. I relish this feeling, the feeling of being surrounded by the presence of strangers, but they remain

adjacent. I feel the presence and yet the street is quiet and I am safe. Away from prying eyes, yet not alone. Just the mere presence of others makes me feel less alone, it soothes the fears of my solipsistic thoughts. For I know I can't cure this solipsism, but at least I can gather whatever evidence I can to point the other way. In that sense, it's not as much an effort to disprove such claims, not even an attempt to find a contradiction, it is just an effort to create doubt, to wonder if there's an alternative to behold. There's a special kind of comfort in doubt, one may think it lazy to just be skeptical, to not force a conclusion, but by suspending judgment there is less to lose. To just throw your hands in the air and admit to being unsure, yes, this is safest. If the tradeoff is being 'spineless' then that is just what it is. I'm not looking for answers, just a reason to be unsure.

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It's getting darker out, I tread further upstream to the town square where the bus will be. I watch my breath as I exhale the cold evening air. Voices grow increasingly faint as I cross on to a quiet street. I peer up into the rows of windows adorned on apartments, most of them are dark, with the occasional exception of a bright yellow window, peppered throughout the dark street. I follow rows of cars as I wrap around the sidewalk. I get hints as to these strangers' lives from their vehicles, just another type of possession. One car has bikes mounted upon the back, I see car seats in another, one has a window punched out and a sloppy mâche of paper and tape covering the hole, better get that fixed soon. You can get interesting hints to a person's life if you see what they own, and furthermore what condition their possessions are in. For when people will themselves upon objects, it points to their own nature, as the impression of their own reflections.

I arrive at the town square and check my watch again.

'8:50— I must have been walking faster than I realized.'

I sauntered to a bench nearby the bust stop and sat. There was a man sitting next to me on the bench. If there had been more than one place to sit I wouldn't have chosen here, but I'd rather endure the uncomfortable silence of a strangers presence as opposed to standing on the curb while waiting for the bus, that's what children do. Just as I was about to light up a cigarette to pass the time, I heard a snicker, then a voice say,

'Ehhh... Spare me a smoke brother?'

Yes, it was the stranger directly to my right. Weren't we sharing enough already? I begrudgingly obliged because what would the alternative be? To say no and sit in even more awkward silence? Or even worse, see if things escalate? I mean, I don't know who this man is, where he comes from, what he's capable of. I indignantly passed him one of my cigarettes without saying a word. I thought that would be the end of it but no! As soon as I finished lighting my cigarette, I heard that gravely voice again.

"Ehhh brotha... Could I get a light?'

I must have been visibly annoyed, because as soon as I passed him my matches, he didn't use them. He just sat there and looked at me.

"You alright sir? I'm sorry to have bothered you— here.'

The stranger reached over to give me the cigarette back.

"Oh no, my apologies sir, you can keep it. I apologize for my demeanor, it's been a long day."

Yes, I was annoyed, and no I didn't want to talk to the man, but I sought it better to just cut my losses, give the man an empty apology and hopefully just get on with my night, but the man continued.

"Where you from eh? Where you off to?"

"I don't think any of that concerns you," I bit back.

"Hah! It sure doesn't! And I wouldn't have really cared whatever answer you would have given me, most people aren't truthful anyways."

"Well maybe most people don't feel like disclosing such things to people they don't know."

"I do know you though— look at me."

The man shifted his torso towards me and peered into my eyes as I glanced at him.

"I've never seen you before sir, I'm incredulous to such a claim."

"You're mistaken," the man said, "we've without a doubt crossed paths before, you look very familiar." He said as he took a drag of my cigarette. "Besides, this isn't the biggest town in the world, there's a good chance I'm right."

"There's a good chance that you're probably drunk right now too, oh yeah, maybe that's where we've crossed paths, the bar."

"Hah! That would be quite strange." The man said.

"Why's that? You obviously aren't seeing straight, because for the last time, I don't know you, drunken fool."

I laugh and take a drag of my cigarette.

"It would be quite strange because I haven't had a drink in five years— lots a lot back then, I had to get straight, you know?"

I was quiet now. I wasn't ashamed of what I said as much as I was just uncomfortable. I didn't wish I hadn't said that remark, I just wish he hadn't had such a response. If he didn't have that type of response then yes, we would still be sitting in silence like we were then, but there wouldn't have been such an uncomfortable air between us. I simply wished to not know such a thing about this man.

Just then, the bus pulled up,

'Must be 9:00 o'clock.' I think to myself

I jump to my feet. And without saying a word, board the bus. I sat down and gaze forward at the front of the vehicle, no one else got on.

'Odd' I thought.

I grew frustrated. Frustrated because now I do know that man, at least in some capacity. Was this some kind of sick joke? If I was ever to see that man again, he would have the advantage, because I would indeed recognize him, and he would surely recognize me. I spent the whole bus ride trying to forget him. For if I genuinely forgot him then he wouldn't have the advantage on me. Oh the irony! Why must the mind fight against itself like this? It's as if my mind is working to forget just as hard as it is trying to remember. It's a battle I know I'll lose and yet I still fight relentlessly. I feel there's an honor in dying on this battlefield as opposed to returning from battle unvictorious.

IV

I peered up at the street sign as the bus veered back on to the road, driving off into the distance.

'Filmore Lane...' I thought to myself.

It was nearly pitch black out, but I still recognized the silhouettes of the buildings around me. This view was tattooed in my mind from the countless hours I spent waiting for the same bus I just got off of when I was in high school. Most kids back then either drove beater cars that would break down at every turn, or their parents luxurious automobiles. Me? Neither. I remained confined to the gift of public transportation, two dollar fares and distrusting stares from the antsy strangers I'd see there. I still don't own a car. I would probably be more efficient with my time if I did, but what is another possession to my name worth at this point? Plus, I like walking. Some walks bear different feelings, a calm stroll around

my apartment or a brisk strut through town square will make you feel different things. This stroll down my old neighborhood is no different. Cutting through old football fields in the dead of night with only the sound of grass crunching beneath my feet. Kicking rocks down a maze of gennels up against fences of quiet suburban families, all these things bring about a strange, tight feeling in my chest. It's strange to follow the same paths as a man now, partially because I am literally taller, my perspective has been altered. The wonder of the unknown, snuffed out by the inevitable belief of certainty, I know this place like the back of my hand. There's no way to unlearn that, no imagination and wonder left.

I arrived at the back gate, I reached over to undo the latch. The backyard feels smaller, it doesn't take me long to get up to the back door. I chuckle as I lift up the mat to find the house key. All these years later and it still hasn't moved an inch. The door creaks open and I step into the kitchen on the other side. It's oh so quiet, perfectly undisturbed. I quietly make my way upstairs and to my old room. I open the door to find everything exactly as it was, exactly as it has always been. My room unchanged, drapes flowing softly as the slight breeze from outside my window gently enters the room

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I won't sleep here, I see it as blasphemy to disrupt the still air enclosed by football posters and photographs alike with my aroma of cigarettes and my muddy boots. I head back down the stairs quietly and into the living room.

'This will do for tonight.' I think to myself as I remove my socks and scrunch up to fit on the couch. 'Hopefully mother isn't too alarmed to find me laying here in the morning,' I chuckle as I think to myself,

'Wouldn't it be funny if she groggily wandered in here tomorrow morning with her coffee and newspaper to find her eldest

son passed out on the couch, looking like a complete and utter squatter in her picture-esque living room.' I laugh,

'Hopefully it's not too alarming, that would sure be a funny way to wake up, to the sound of your mother's scream and the sound of a coffee mug dropping to the floor, I can't think of a much more alarming awakening!'

I squirm and shift on to my side, at eye level with the coffee table I slowly drift off into the marrow of that dream again, into that warm, viscous pool of memories untouched, untethered, unbothered. I've sunken to the floor, I'm deep in the viscous marrow once more.

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It's that cool July afternoon again. Heavy condensation in the air keeps my cool under the beaming sun. My shoes are off, my white shirt untucked, cargo pants rolled up to keep them dry from the coming and going of the tide. The ocean is roaring and you're a few steps ahead of me laughing, we're walking against the wind and your hair is flowing gently. You say something to me, I can't remember what it was now, and then you begin running down the shoreline, I chase after you. Maybe you said something about playing tag? Maybe you saw something in the distance? Why can't I remember such simple things? Why is my memory growing so opaque? I'm following you but I can't seem to catch up. How are you outrunning me? Is it because we're running on sand? Or against the wind? Or both? I'm almost sprinting and I still get nowhere near closer to you. Did I catch up to you eventually? I must have, I swear I did? Did I yell out your name and you turned around? Too late to try now, you're too far away. I smell smoke, I begin to cough and come to a halt. I guess I never could run that fast or for that long anyways, consequences of being a smoker. This scent of smoke is unruly, I'm disoriented. It's getting hazy and I stumble back as if I'm light headed. I don't know where you

went, where you are. I spin around and you're nowhere to be found. I tried to say something, but the running and smoke constricts my airways, I can barely breathe where I stand. Where is this smoke from anyways? Is someone stoking a fire nearby? Even if they were, why is there so much smoke? How many fires are there? Where? How?

V

Sunlight pierces my eyelids and I rustle on the couch. However, in an instant I leap up at the persistent smell of smoke from that dream. Disoriented, I run to the entry way and look around, no fire. I check the kitchen, no fire. But just as I was about to run upstairs, I caught a glimpse of flickering orange light from outside the window out of the corner of my eye. I bursted out of the back door to find the most strange and alarming sight, my mother standing there, stoking a growing fire with a variety of our family's belongings.

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It was an absurdly picture-esque sight to behold. The stark contrast of the glowing hue of a mounting flame on the backdrop of a grayish blue morning sky, heavy frost outside, and my mother standing with her back turned from the house in her long coat, poking at the fire with a pool cue, all accentuated by a line of dense pine trees in the background. It was an entrancing image, it took me a second for me to collect myself and yell out to her.

"Mom! What are you doing?"

She calmly turned around and smiled,

"Honey! What a pleasant surprise!"

I quickly walked closer to her and the growing flame.

"What are you doing? Is everything ok? Are you feeling ok? Why— why are you burning all this stuff?" I uttered as I crouched down and dug through a pile of my old possessions.

"Just thought it was time to get rid of some stuff is all." She said and smiled.

"Well take it to a donation center for Christ's sake, why are you burning everything?" I retorted quickly.

"Oh— oh well why bother with all that? It all ends up in the landfill anyways, just a matter of time before it gets thrown into a fire one way or another honey. Plus, I would've had to hire someone to help me move it all out, this way I don't have to worry about all that— plus, it's keeping me warm." She laughed

"How did you get this all out here in the first place? Lord, tell me you didn't move it all yourself?"
She laughed again.

"No honey, the neighbors helped yesterday afternoon get this all set up, you see— they didn't find it too strange either now?"

"Well maybe they're just too senile to really understand what you were planning on doing."

"Honey, that's not nice to talk about them in that way, they're very kind people."

"Very confused apparently."

"Calm down honey, it's alright, you don't really come by that often anymore, so I didn't think you would mind. Were you wanting to keep some of these things?"
I paused, I really wasn't. To be honest, I couldn't have cared less if I had never seen these things ever again. Some of them I forgot I even had. What good would these toys, clothes, pictures, and posters do for me now? They serve no utility to me. I have no one to pass them on to, no incentive of any kind of lineage. So why then was I still upset? In all practicality I wouldn't be if I was being practical, but there was something underneath this blanket

of practicality I had yet to uncover. A hidden layer of emotion like a raw nerve, sensitive to the touch. I was trying not to think about that, I was trying to stay on the level of practicality and reason, but watching those old belongings I used to value so highly be reduced to ash on the ground was unsettling, I couldn't contain myself.

"Why didn't you ask me first?" I said in an overtly agitated tone.

"What? Did you want to keep any of these things honey? I didn't know, I'm sorry."

"No— but..." I stammered.

My mother looked at me with eyes both concerned and confused.

"That's enough of this." I mumbled as I turned around and retreated into the house.

"Honey, Dear?"

—

I quickly rummaged under the sink and ripped out a bucket. I threw it under the faucet and filled it to the brim with ice cold water. The bucket was much heavier than I expected it to be, this became the most apparent as I shakily heaved it outside and stumbled over to the fire again, now even bigger than before.

"Honey? What are you doing?" Mother asked worryingly.

Without a word I began swaying the bucket back and forth, building momentum, it reached higher and higher up into the air with every swing. However, I miscalculated the weight of the bucket in relation to the weight of my body, and as soon as I let go, or I guess 'attempted' to let go, the bucket got caught on my fingers. I fully lost my balance and I was pulled into the fire with it.

Mother screamed and dropped down to me, I was yelling as well. In an instant I leaped back up, then immediately jumped back into the dry grass behind me and I began rolling around. Mother

crawled over to me while yelling my name. I rolled onto my back while I breathed heavily.

"Honey, honey, are you alright?" Mother asked repeatedly.
I didn't answer immediately, I was just breathing while staring up into the grayish blue morning sky, listening to the crackling of the fire in the background. Mother groaned in pain and collapsed into the grass with me.

"Mom, are you alright?" I exclaimed, crouching over her.

"Oh— oh my, yes honey, I think so. I landed on my knees, I need to go inside." She exhaled, "I need to lay down."
I helped her up and walked her inside, leaving the glowing orange hue behind us as we made for the living room.

—

Both exhausted, mother stretched out on the couch that I had slept on the night prior. I slumped over in a chair to her right. A long moment of silence stood between the two of us, before she quietly asked for me to go and put out the fire. I obliged. This time I found the hose in the backyard and slowly snuffed the flame out. What remained when the flame was gone was a mound of black, charred objects. I could make out a few distinct shapes, but most things had morphed into an amalgamation of burnt, melted, faceless matter. There were a few things that hadn't been tossed into the pit yet. I thought about bringing them inside and putting them back where they belonged, but I just gave up and left them there.

"Fire is out." I mumbled as I entered the living room.
I slumped back down into the chair and exhaled. I waited for mother to say something, anything, but she didn't. I heard the slightest sniffle from her head that was turned away from me, then I saw her lean her head down into her hands.

"Mom..." I started, but she cut me off.

"Honey please, don't say anything else."

I was about to try and say something to get her to stop crying, but nothing exited my mouth as I opened it. I just sat there, slumped over in that chair, feeling utterly defeated. A wave of guilt washed over me, which was a feeling I didn't think I'd felt since I was a child. I felt like a child again at that moment, like I was seven again and had just been sent home from school for fighting with a classmate. I hated every excruciating moment I sat there. I missed my apartment, which I didn't know if I ever had before. All of a sudden I missed all my possessions too, which felt incredibly strange. Well, maybe I didn't miss the possessions themselves, but the fact that they belonged to me, the fact that I was in control of them, that I controlled my environment. That I had final say on what I did to them and what I chose to do in general. There, I'm liberated, as opposed to the oppression of being in this house, this house where for years I spent my time completely out of control of my sense of self and individuality.

At that moment, it occurred to me why I harbored such resentment towards the burning and destruction of my old possessions in the backyard. Perhaps it wasn't because I wanted them. It wasn't that I cared about them, or sought to preserve them in any capacity, yes, it is true I feel completely detached from them. And still, it was through my possessions as a kid that I found myself. It was through them that I sculpted myself like that clay upon the potter's wheel, trying desperately to shape the vase I wished oh so much to see. What child doesn't adorn themselves in possessions as a means to satisfy a craving for individuality? For uniqueness? All as a way to feel seen, to feel desperate and valued as an autonomous entity. They serve no purpose to me now. Frankly, if I kept them it would be quite unusual, but still knowing they exist, to me is much preferable to their destruction. My attachment is one of separation. They remind me of a past of ignorant joy, of a naiveté so pure I couldn't help but embrace the

day with open arms. Now, it's as if distrust walks with me at every step, as I open doors to see who's on the other side, when I speak to strangers and second guess their every word, when I receive letters in the mail as well, truly it feels as if eggshells are all I can walk upon. Without those old belongings, it is as if I've lost my origin. I've been untethered from whatever sense of home I've ever had.

Of course I didn't utter a single one of those thoughts as I lay slumped over in that chair. Mother got quiet and wiped her eyes.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" She asked calmly.

I made an affirmative sound, and she promptly left for the kitchen. It was around 9:00 AM when she returned with two cups of steaming green tea. We sat in silence, blowing off our cups and taking small incremental sips. I began to get lost in thought, but the tone of mother's voice brought me back to the confines of the room.

"I didn't know you wanted to keep those things." She said, "I'm sorry."

"No, It's alright." I said and paused for thought, "I don't know what came over me."

She turned and met my eyes with a look of confusion.

"You... Want me to get rid of them still?" She said cautiously.

"Yes."

She pursed her lips slightly and looked like she was about to speak again, but didn't. Instead she just took another sip of her tea.

"It's been quiet here ever since your dad died." She said after a moment of silence.

"That was what, around four years ago now?" I said in an inquisitive tone.

"Yes, honey." She replied, then after a moment she looked at me and blankly stated, "the silence doesn't fade over time, you know?"

I was slightly caught off guard, but quickly responded,

"Yes, of course not."

"Sometimes— I feel like I need to remember that I'm still changing." She said looking off into the photos propped up on the coffee table. "Just because I'm older now doesn't mean I'm like dried concrete honey." She laughed, "I just thought it would be nice to do some early spring cleaning, you're all grown up, and a lot of these things remind me of your father. I guess I just thought it was time to make space for something new around here."

"Why do you want to get rid of things that remind you of him? Weren't you married for what, around forty years?"

"Yes honey, forty-three years. And I loved it all, well— most of it." She smiled, "but we had our time together, it was just as much time as it could have been."

She paused and was about to say something, then stopped. There was a brief moment of silence, and then she uttered,

"Your father will always have a special place in my heart that won't ever change dear. But even after you build a house in the woods, the first still grows, still changes shape around those four walls. That's like me honey, I'm like the forest."

I understood the sentiment but hated the conclusion, if it wasn't for the shame I felt for what happened earlier, I probably would have argued back. I didn't want to have to witness her cry again though, so I stayed quiet. The quiet didn't last long though, my nerves jumped after what she said next, which caught me off guard.

"Maybe if you thought about what happened with Amelia that way, It could help you too."

—

An instant shutter went down my spine the second I heard your name again. I hated hearing your name, it made me nauseous, uncomfortable, and angry. That is something I fear I'll never be

able to forget, never be able to overcome. My posture quickly straightened in that chair and I then rose to my feet.

"I must be on my way now mother, I'm sorry." I said after a long exhale. "I've got some errands to run."

"What? It's Sunday honey, are you sure you couldn't stay a little longer? Are you upset?" She said in a defeated tone.

I hated when she asked that. Yes, I was upset, but no, I'm not upset. I just wanted to leave at that moment, I wasn't far off from doing so anyways. I didn't respond to her question, I walked out of the living room and put my cup in the sink. I made my way out the back door and was halfway through the backyard, stepping over the mound of charred objects when mother called out my name from the deck. I stopped and turned around.

"Have a wonderful day honey, come visit soon."

Mother looked happy, but I could tell she wasn't. She was doing a poor job of trying to hide her emotions. I wanted to say something to make her feel better, I truly did, but just like the entire morning, it felt like nothing I could say or do was right, nothing could mend my actions. I simply waved my hand in the air and turned back around, and to the gate I headed. In an instant, I disappeared into the gennel, mother went back inside.

VI

A heavy fog had rolled into the valley that morning. An overwhelming sense of estrangement followed as I weaved through streets and fields, attempting to retrace my steps back to the bus stop. Yes, I knew that neighborhood quite well, but when it was obscured by the gauze of vapor like it was that morning, my memories too became just as opaque. I subsist off of that lack, off that confusion that allows me to remain undecided. In a state of confusion and disillusionment I thrive. I'm comforted by my will

to ignorance. There, my hatred for your name stems. Just as how this fog disillusions me from my travels, the obscuring of your name, reducing the identifier to just 'you' disillusions me from who you really are. I become estranged from the act, and reduced to the idea. You, exist the way I want you to when you are mediated through that dream, obscured in the viscous marrow, you're symbolic of so much more than you actually ever were. You become symbolic of a reflection of myself. I see in you a reflection of me as the man I aspired to be. The way I smiled, the way I laughed, even the way I exercised my wit feels foreign to my mannerisms now. You excite something different in me. Something I don't have access to on my own volition.

I'm passing through town now, I've emerged from the dense haze cloaking neighborhoods and found myself engulfed in the hustle and bustle of smokestacks, steel mills, and dense foot traffic. Like in the fog, I'm still disoriented, but in an opposite way. I've transitioned from a lack of understanding to the overwhelming stimulation of incentive. The incentive for action is potent in the air here. Men slave away, confined to their machines, doing everything they can to be as efficient as they could possibly be. Oh, to squeeze every ounce of sweat out of every pore on their forehead, maximal exertion must mean maximal efficiency, right? Wouldn't that be an apt measure for success? To crawl into bed after a day of intense labor, to feel your body ache as you quench your mind with the hedonistic pleasures masquerading as a certain type of reward? To 'earn your keep,' work for your money and reward yourself with cigarettes, drink, hearty food, and women.

I met many men of this sort while I was in school. The type of man that would make you feel stupid for doing the work that was assigned for class the day prior. I took my studies seriously at that age. However, no matter how well I knew the material during class, I could never muster up the courage to speak and contribute

to the conversation.My actions put me in a strange position in class. On one hand, I pitied the dreary eyed teachers who would ask questions knowing there would be no response from any of the students. However, I knew that I could never fix that dynamic by attempting to be the change they desired to see. I stayed quiet, hoping instead that at least giving them my attention would be a less effective, but still meaningful gesture, the type very few even tried to give. At some point I had the sickening realization that from their perspective, me paying attention but not speaking probably left them thinking I was just a clueless idiot that was incapable of answering, which couldn't have been further from the case. I was alarmed by this realization. This zugzwang left me paralyzed. On the one hand, I could divert my attention like the other men unwilling to listen, or I could continue to stare blankly at the teachers' sunken faces as they lecture to the concrete wall behind our seats. I chose the former, blending in with the other students. But I couldn't help but perk my ears whenever a stray voice would call out into the silent room and ask a question that sometimes roused the room into discussion. Such an occurrence only strengthened my desire to have my voice be heard, but I feared that my knowledge and ability to answer the question would not only snuff out the conversation and lead the classroom back into desolate silence, but it would also oust me as a pretentious know-it-all, which I feared more than anything. By blending in with the taciturn crowd, some assumed I was more like them than I really was. They would jest before and after class about the ridiculousness of school and their desire to just work and attain their respective wealth. They would all laugh and turn to me as if to receive some further conformation, but that was assurance I couldn't provide them. They'd stare into my blank face for a while before pivoting back to the conversation, repeating the same three or four redundant points to one another in an attempt

to reassure one another of their choices. I could tell that below the surface of these jokes and glances there was a genuine worry in their hearts. It was as if they stood on the edge of a cliff, peering into the lake below, thinking about jumping in, but only willing to do so if they knew for certain that the rest of them would too. They would all jump together if they could, but their fear of reservations left them just standing on the cliffside. I knew if I jumped into the lake with them, I'f be the only one to float back up to the surface while they all descended into the dream of job security, retirement funds, and 40 year mortgages. They know not that I am pumice while they're scoria. I can't reassure them of anything because I myself am just as unsure. If I said anything, I'm sure I would have only left them more apprehensive than before. For their own sake, I kept quiet, even if they didn't know I was doing them a favor.

—

You, however, were the one I could confide in, unlike them. I remember those long walks where I could speak freely, about anything I wished to. I spoke earnestly about my reservations, my apprehensions, my insecurities. Oh how nice it was to diffuse the gasses that let my pumice sink into the dream we shared. These thoughts only grow within me now, unable to escape the entrapment of my psyche. I can subdue them through my consumption, through my hedonism, but as time presses on I find them harder to keep at bay. I know there is no remedy for this dilemma, man is a social creature. I could search for a new companion to confide in, but it would only ever be temporary. It is an inevitable process like being hungry and eating, just to eventually become hungry once again. I could speak and project my thoughts out into the ears of another, just to find that in a matter of days I'd be searching to do so again, there is no answer to my dilemma, no remedy to seek out. How I wish I had a bigger

stomach, so big I could eat once and never have to do so again until I die. If I could project these thoughts in such a great fury that there would be none left to utter, I would. Unfortunately they're inescapable though, it is impossible to outrun this mind, for truly, it is my only companion.

—

Despite my memories of nameless classmates and unenthusiastic teachers, I quite enjoy the banal terrain of that industrial sprawl. It too is nameless, faceless, merely an amalgamation of brick and churning machinery. It's easier to be detached when you struggle to pick out detail, which makes me more assured I won't actually do so. But the environment is beginning to change as I keep walking. Pubs and markets begin to crop up within the industrial backdrop as I venture closer to the heart of the city. A man is standing next to a cart on the sidewalk as he yells out to passersby. Whatever he's selling, I'm sure he will bother me about, but before I reach him I quickly dart into an alleyway. Voices become increasingly faint, I look up to see a constant plume of smoke emerging from the roof of a building above. I continue down the narrow brick pathway and into an oddly quiet street, removed from the commotion of local commerce. I know this place well, I've been here before many times. The sheer amount of nighttime strolls inevitably lead me into all the nooks and crannies of this wretched place. I slowly stroll up to two big wooden doors that slide open horizontally. It looks as if it's a loading bay for some business on the front side of the building, but I at least know that is not the case. I fish out some money from the wallet in my pocket as I step up to a middle aged man sitting in a chair next to the entrance. Cigarette in mouth, he glances up at me and chuckles,

"Back again then?"

I say nothing, I simply wave the money in front of his face and he reluctantly takes it, counts it slowly, and reveals the watch on his wrist.

"It is 11:30 sir, you have two hours, come and see me if you need more time."

He smiled up at me and banged on the door behind him. The door slid open, barely enough for me to squeeze through, and I ventured down a set of stairs to the sound of growing music echoing out from below.

VII

A dense aroma of tobacco smoke grew more and more poignant as I reached the bottom of the stairs and entered a large rectangular room with oddly high ceilings. There was a large, flowing chandelier omitting a soft yellow hue that was illuminating the room, with the help of a variety of lamps hung up on walls and resting on tables. An old phonograph was playing slow jazz numbers as a plethora of voices muddled one another and while shadowy figures moved about the room. The dull lighting obscured many details, but I instantly recognized the beautiful mahogany floors and pillars, accented by sprawling velvet sofas resting upon Persian rugs. The room had such a warmth to it that as soon as you entered, you would just want to collapse into the furniture and wait for the beautiful women working there to come and attend to your needs. I had come at a strange hour however. Given that it was around 11:00 AM , the room was less lively than the typical evening rush. The demographic was also much more unbalanced. With most of the usual men at work or with their families at that time in the day, many of the women were simply lounging around the lobby, some even passed out on the sofas. I assume when business is slow and they aren't anticipating

customers, they don't feel a need to accentuate themselves as much as they're normally expected to. Some women sit in circles on the floor smoking cigarettes, braiding one another's hair while telling stories. Such a sight with the music from the phonograph serving as the soundtrack brought about an oddly calm sensation in my chest, my guard lowered. I waltzed further into the room and chose a place to sit. After a prolonged exhale I felt two soft hands each around from the back of my head and covered my eyes. I felt a cool breath come close to my ear and whisper,

"What took you so long?"

Her voice was so gentle it felt like it could shatter at the slightest disturbance.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come back."

The woman giggled as her hands receded. She entered my field of vision from the left, I watched as the details of her white dress refracted light as she gracefully moved in front of me. My glasses were slightly fogged over from the humidity of the room, her figure remained slightly obscured. I can hear her footsteps upon the mahogany floor as she moves to my right, I remain still. I don't even bother turning my head. I close my eyes and feel as she runs her hand down my forearm. The soft touch of her hand feels like warm water from a faucet. Her hand interlocks mine, I still refuse to turn my head and yet I know she peers directly into my physiognomy. I sink further into the sofa and her breath returns to my ear,

"Would you like to go somewhere quieter?" She asked oh so calmly.

I wanted to say yes, but I'm still tired from my travels.

"Fetch me a drink first dear."

"Of course, love."

I felt her hand slip away and I opened my eyes.

I let this feeling of disarmament consume me as she hands me my drink. Curled up on the couch next to me, she reaches over and kisses my neck before whispering in my ear,

"I'll be back shortly."

She disappeared into the silhouettes of the room and I was left alone once again.

I can't so much as be bothered by a single worry here. My thoughts become dull and my demeanor subdued. All my attention rests upon the drink in my hand and the cigarette cradled in my other. My attention is eventually roused by the newfound sight of a man lying upon the sofa to my left, in a state much like my own. Our eyes meet and he smiles while raising his glass to me. He's an older man with a balding head and circular glasses resting upon his bulbous nose.

"Fine way to spend your afternoon, isn't it?"

I chuckle as I take a sip from my glass,

"I'd say so."

I admit I was slightly unnerved by the stranger speaking to me, especially the type of stranger who would be in a place like this, at this hour. My fears were eased when he spoke again however.

"One thing sir— " he started. He looked me dead in the eyes and then placed his hand over his face. "I'm not here— and you don't know me."

He bursted into laughter. I immediately understood this was most likely a man with adverse obligations that would conflict with his current actions, mainly a wife and maybe kids if I were to guess.

"Me too." I said to hopefully ease his concerns.

"Hah— you understand." He said with ease. "A man needs to escape sometimes, you know? Stress is the real killer." He said before sipping his drink again. "It isn't easy being the provider for so many people. Your family, your boss, your employees, and so on. It's so many eyes gazing at you all the time, and they all see

someone different, someone who they expect a certain something from too." He paused, "makes you wonder who— or even what you exactly are. You need to be a hero for your kids, a romantic for your wife, a leader for your workers, but a model worker for your boss. You put on so many masks that you start to wonder when you're wearing one and when you're not."

At that moment, some of the women sitting on the floor erupted into laughter and fell onto their backs.

"Damn fine women here." He continued, "they don't expect much of you— well, not in the typical ways I guess. They just see you as you present yourself and don't know anything more, damn, they don't even want to know more. No names, no stories— unless you want to tell a joke or two, that's the way I like it. I get to be anonymous to them and myself, I get to just be— here."

I was oblivious as to why the man had chosen me to rant to, I guessed that he was a lonely man. Regardless, I wasn't very bothered by it. In a way he's right, and I can't help but agree with him. Here, I'm just another man willing to give himself over to a young, pretty woman with no strings attached. To them, I'm just another face in the crowd, just another means to our shared desire of overwhelming pleasure. With no concerns for lingering feelings, no desire for exclusivity, I'm detached from any sentiment of love. There is no love here, but that doesn't mean there is hate in its place. No, It's just an ensnarement of pleasure. This proved to be where the trainer and I differed however.

"Who ever thought the place I'd find true love would be in a whorehouse!" The man remarked and laughed. "This is what I call love, just a good time, just appreciate it while you can before you have to run back to the doghouse!"

His eyes widened and he pulled at his shirt collar as if to indicate he knew this fantasy wouldn't last forever. As if he knew he was bound to be caught someday.

What an ignorant man he must be to mistake brutish pleasure of this sort with love. How could he understand they refrain from knowing Jim and still think that they share a bond that goes any deeper? Thinking that such indolent behavior somehow gets him closer to a thing as benign as love is a stupid thought. How sad it is too that he disregards the impact his choices will someday have on his life in the hour side world, we differ in this way. There's no one to question my choices, neither decisions here nor anywhere else. There's no wondering where I am, questioning how I spend my time. No one to worry about my health after I finish another drink, after I smoke another cigarette. All the damage I inflict upon my body is hidden on the inside, masked by the guise of my stature. Truly, my days bleed together since there is no one ever causing me to recount them. My memory remains hazy from my failure to do anything of note. I can walk around at night and explore any place I wish, but I'll never find anything worth remembering. I never have a story to recount during conversations, never a woman to miss after I leave this place I'm in. This must be the price I pay for remaining detached. Detached from my possessions from which I ascribe no value, detached from places I refuse to romanticize, detached from people I wish not to know. The only constant I can ever rely on, the only person I fail to not know is you. I'm beginning to feel that all my efforts to refrain from my environment only strengthen the memory, the viscous dream that you seem to always be at the bottom of. The irony! The one person I fail to not know, is the only person I cannot find. You, impossible to seek out, remain as an impression upon my consciousness that I can never outrun!

—

These thoughts cause me to feel restless. I'm no longer paying attention to the stranger seated next to me. I glanced over to see the woman from before on the other side of the room, her eyes

fixated on mine despite the conversation she was a part of. Our shared stare beckons her over to me, I finish my drink. We don't so much as say a word to one another, she rakes my hands and I lift myself up from the sofa. Our eyes remained locked on one another, she smiled at me. We then waltzed across the room, she took me down a hallway of rooms until we arrived at one marked '17' on the door. She slowly opens the door, revealing a bedroom much more ornamental than my own. What followed after I stepped into that room was all a haze, it always is. The entire act is always an amalgamation of carnality, of skin and sweat, breathing and biting, in the dark I can never really tell where she begins and where I end.

VIII

Time is rendered obsolete. I became completely fixed within that cycle of pleasing one another, of her fetching us more drinks, smoking cigarettes together, and feeling her complexion as we lay upon the bed. All of such actions only perpetuate the cycle further. The drunker I become, the more helpless I feel. I lose control of my mind and we envelop one another. She speaks, but it must be in a foreign language because I continually fail to understand her. My heart beats out of my chest as I lay sprawled out on the bed, watching her take my wallet to the door and hand cash to a figure creeping in. Time must've been dragging on if she was paying him for more hours, but somehow it felt as if we had just laid down. She returned from the door and crawled on top of me again, through the blur of my vision I could trace her figure. I close my eyes and feel as she runs her hands down my forearm. The soft touch of her hand feels like warm water from a faucet. I opened my eyes and saw her mouth moving, I still couldn't understand. I couldn't tell what she said, but I also didn't care

either. I had nowhere to be, no one to see. I could've laid on that bed for the rest of my days if I wanted. The woman got up and began to get dressed. I watched her fix her hair in the mirror and promptly leave the room. I couldn't care less. I've sunken to the floor, I'm deep in the viscous marrow once more.

—

I awoke from the marrow of that dream to find everything exactly as it was, exactly as it has always been. This room unchanged, I roll over on to my stomach and gaze at the floral patterns plastered on the wall. My eyes drift to the Persian rugs and then to the satin sheets. I'm overcome with the deepest disgust. The pale greens and harsh pinks composing the interior of this room make me sick. My temples are pounding and the room feels as if it is spinning uncontrollably. Once again, I'm reduced to the solipsistic thought trapped within these walls. 'You're gone, it is silent now.' With no windows to peer out of I had no idea as to what time it was. How did I get here? Why did I come here? I'm uncomfortable in my own thoughts as I recollect my recent memory. Wasn't I just in mother's living room waking up to the smell of rising smoke? What happened to her? Where was the fire? Was there a fire? Or was that just smoke omitting from the kitchen while she made breakfast? I get up, disoriented, sloppily sliding my pants back on and buttoning my shirt. The simplest of actions somehow required the entirety of my effort. This made me upset, why must I try so hard? I can barely lace my shoes right. Stumbling down hallways and pushing through doors, I arrived back at the lounge.

'Wasn't I just here?' I thought to myself. The same music was echoing from the phonograph in the corner. The same voices spoke and laughed as I made my way past the women there. As I traversed the room, the stranger caught my eye again. The same stranger from before was still resting upon the sofa with a drink in his hand. With the same bald head and the same circular glasses

upon the same bulbous nose, it must've been him. I must've stopped and stared, because he turned towards me and smiled, he didn't so much as utter a word, only reaching his hand across his face yet again. His voice echoes in my mind much like it had before,

'I'm not here— and you don't know me.'

—

Once I emerged back out onto the street, I was met with the cool breeze of nighttime air. I pulled up my coat sleeve to find my watch was missing. I struggle to navigate those winding alleyways. With my only trail being the faint noise of voices, I'm left completely disoriented. I finally reached a road, yet I struggled to recognize it. The more I looked around, the longer I failed to identify some sort of landmark to help me discern my position. Passerby's bilious laughter brought my attention back to my pounding head, my ears were ringing due to the sound of their voices. I must have been stumbling a noticeable amount, because as I approached a group of men walking up the street, I bumped into one of them who I was expecting to move slightly as we crossed paths on the narrow path.

"Excuse you, sir..." The man said reluctantly.

On any other occasion I would have just kept walking, but in such an agitated state by the overwhelming sickness and spatial confusion I harbored, I couldn't control myself any longer.

"Pardon?" I retorted in an overtly upset tone.

"What?"

The man stopped and turned around, followed by the other men.

"I said... Pardon?" Still in an agitated tone, "the nerve you must have getting in people's way."

"You were in my way." The man retorted.

"Oh fuck off."

"Ay fuck you"

I turned to walk away as I had nothing else to say, but as soon as I turned my back, I heard a rush of footsteps. The man grabbed me by the back of my shoulders. I tried to spin around and raise up my arm, but I was too inebriated and he immediately sent his fist flying into my left cheek. Somehow, I managed to stay on my feet, and then without thinking, I lunged at the man, sending us both into the pavement. The man kneed my stomach causing me to wretch violently. The other men he was walking with then intervened and pulled us apart and back to our feet. One of the men grabbed my arms and twisted them behind my back to hold me still. I writhed in pain as I let out an elongated yelp. Both the man and I were breathing heavily as I continued gagging and shaking all over. My legs were so weak, but the man holding me still prevented me from dropping to the ground. Once the man caught his breath, he looked me in the eyes and muttered,

"You're scum. What hole did you crawl out of?"

I still had nothing to say. I stared at him as I continued gasping for air. The man just looked at me as I stood in silence. He had a peculiar look on his face, the longer he stared at me, the more his eyebrows furrowed, as if he recognized me from somewhere, but hadn't realized until that moment.

"I know you—" He said under his breath. He paused to think, then said, "the bus stop— last night. You gave me a cigarette before making me regret ever asking."

It was as if I died in that moment, as if my heart came to a halt.

"You insulted me then, you continue to insult me now?" He said in a raised tone, just before reaching into his pocket and revealing a large switchblade knife.

"Arthur— come on now." One of the men interrupted.

"No— No!" He yelled, "Someone ought to teach this cunt a lesson yeah? No respect— he has absolutely no respect! Walking

around, stepping on any man he speaks to, I bet he steps all over his own family too!"

The man reached the blade up to my face, I didn't so much as flinch.

"I hate your kind." He said softly before slashing open the shallow skin on my bruised cheek.

I screamed out in pain as I wriggled out of their hold, dropping to the ground. The man kicked me in the stomach again as yelled out,

"Filth! Filth! You're Filth!"

He crouched down and reached to press the knife upon my throat, I was gagging and coughing up clots of blood onto the pavement now. Just then one of the other men pulled him off me and they began arguing.

"That's enough Arthur! The man is sick, can't you see? He's drunk. Let his pathetic ass be now. The cunt's learned his lesson, let him crawl back to whatever hole he came out of."

"I'll kill him I swear." Arthur seethed.

"Arthur, we're going to be late to Milo's." One of the other men said.

The name Milo must have perked his ears as he panned around the group with his eyes wide as could be.

"Alright, let's go."

They began to leave, but not before the man kicked me one more time and spat on my face.

"Cunt."

IX

I laid there for what felt like a long while in complete silence. With a swollen cheek and broken glasses, my vision was blurry at best. The sheer silence indicated not a single soul was nearby. I writhed in pain at the slightest movement of my torso, any attempt to rise

to my feet failed. I decided to just give up. Maybe a stranger would come across me and wish to call for an ambulance, but then again, what if they chose to just keep walking? If they were to just step over my battered body and claim they 'didn't realize' for one reason or another, then they could just claim their ignorance prevented them from taking action. If a stranger remained removed, then they wouldn't have to bother with the trouble, effort, or responsibility of whatever burned I posed on them. But I oh so wished for nothing more than such a scenario! But I pause. As this desire washes over me, and an even more damning realization confronts me, one I cannot turn away from, one I cannot deny. A realization that sent shivers down my spine. It was absolutely undeniable that I too, would be such a man that would step over a man in the state I was in. I would not bat an eye, refrain from noticing details, and do whatever it takes to preserve and cultivate my ignorance.

'Was the man really bleeding? I didn't see any blood.'

'I thought maybe he had just drank too much and passed out there, I didn't want to disturb him.'

'I was in a rush anyways, If I hadn't had dinner to attend I would have maybe stopped for the man, even if I believed him to just be drunk and asleep.'

'You see, my mind is elsewhere when I'm stressed, especially about important events, it's very much a flaw on my part, I take responsibility for letting my stress do that to me.'

Yes, I truly could make myself believe anything I wanted to, given I rationalized the situation enough. I could exculpate myself of any implication by what I simply do not do, what I choose to ignore, what I refuse to understand, and how I rack my brain to think of any and every possible alternative to cast a shadow of doubt over what I claim to behold. All I could do was laugh at this realization.

'What a funny situation this is.' I thought to myself as I lay there on the pavement.

An odd sense of empathy came across me as I thought about all the times in recent memory I had figuratively or literally stepped over someone by means of protecting what I believed to be 'my own peace.' I'm not a stupid man, I'm not oblivious to the fact that it is contradictory of me to step over others and in an instant wish for help once I lay like they do. It is not that I claim some level of superiority over them, that's not why I'd refuse to lend a hand. No, the reality is much more selfish. I was plagued with this corrosive fear of their gaze. An anxiety so poignant that as time dragged on, it birthed a new resentment that started to take a life of its own. An anger begotten by the dirty, rotten, innards of my mind seized me and I can't help but writhe as a result. Enraged by my dissatisfactions that I refuse to take accountability for, I only alienate myself further as time dragged on. We humans cannot help but be self-referential, we look into mirrors and reflections and discover a body from which we can will ourselves onto. Wet clay, sculpting tirelessly into the night, we keep trying to impress a reality that we deep down know we won't be able to.

—

I laid there for quite a while longer. I knew it must've been late at night at that point, because at a certain point all of the distant voices and cars slowly became increasingly infrequent. It was silent as I lay there. On my back looking up at the night sky. It was a black sky, I couldn't see a single star out due to the heavy light pollution of the urban landscape I lay in the heart of. I would've continued to lay there longer, I truly had nowhere to be, but I thought about my apartment, about my empty bed left undisturbed and realized I would much rather lay there, away from the prying eyes of folks in the morning leaving their apartments for work or taking their kids to school. I too had work

in the morning, but no intention of showing up at this point. Paychecks, mortgages, retirement funds, empty break rooms, all this has grown so dull to me now. I pride myself on how in the moment I've become. I'm here now and I'm fully present. I feel so bad for the folk wandering thought every day just thinking about tomorrow's trouble, but I digress.

I slowly rolled on to my stomach and propped my hands beneath me and consequently pushing myself up onto my knees at that moment I realized how hurt I really was. However long I had been lying there, my attention had slowly pulled away from my body, but I was reminded in an instant of my beating once I rose to my feet. With everything feeling sore, I couldn't as much as stumble back down the sidewalk, going somewhere unknown. Despite the vast amount of walks I'd taken through this town, at this moment as I limped down the street, I was completely disoriented. I continued wandering in hopes that I'd come across a landmark to reorient myself.

One of my eyes was very swollen, and my glasses were long lost. My entire field of vision was skewed as street lamps became fuzzy poles with glowing tops, and the sidewalk was reduced to a blurry path I aimlessly followed. This made searching for a landmark incredibly challenging. Everything resembled the most basic of shapes, and everything looked like everything else. Despite this, my sense of sound was still intact, but somewhat useless in the dead quiet of the early morning, or at least that is what I initially thought. While I stumbled down that foreign path, with my mind racing with a myriad of unimportant thoughts, a single noise caught my attention, stopping me in my tracks. It was an odd noise, it didn't sound like the rustling of the tree branches in the wind, the sound of footsteps on pavement, or anything of this sort for that matter. It was a single, albeit quiet noise, so sharp it cut through the night time air like a knife through butter, piercing my ears and bringing

me to a halt. I stood there for a second in silence waiting to see if I could hear it again. I tried to look around, but with my vision impaired, that proved to be quite useless. Just then I heard the noise again. I slowly crept forward and continued to look around to the best of my ability. I still saw nothing. The noise rang out again, this time I heard it better, I recognized it as a sniffle, like one from a runny nose. At this moment I realized I was not alone in the night. I continued slowly walking, listening as I believed the sound was growing louder and louder. Finally, I peered towards a street lamp, and my gaze followed down the pole to behold a blurry white figure sitting upon what I assumed to be a bend underneath the streetlight. I slowly approached the noise as I became more certain of its origin. Once I got close enough to the figure, I called out,

"Hello?" In a very light and cautious breath.

The figure froze and became silent. I watched it slightly turn towards me, but then quickly back away again.

"Don't look at me, please." A quivering voice said.

The timber of the figure's voice made me realize that this was a young woman, and she was crying. I was still in a great deal of pain, and my aimless wandering had not only made me tired, but also unhopeful of my goal of getting home, so I calmly asked,

"May I sit?"

There was a pause, and then another sniffle.

"Yes, but please don't look at me."

I promptly collapsed on to the bench next to the woman. I could see her slightly better now due to my proximity, but her body was still tuned away from me, and still quite blurry. I remained silent, she continued crying. Her crying was strange, it was soft and felt reserved, like she was only letting out the least amount of tears she could. I craned my neck backwards, feeling the soreness upon my face and torso. I didn't wish to speak at all, so the woman and I

simply sat there in the dead of night as I took heavy breaths, and she, much lighter and shaky ones.

X

We could have remained in silence, It wouldn't have made much of a difference to me. I thought about asking why she was so upset, but I knew if I did, this figure would become a person, and I'd never be able to unsee her as such again. If it was anyone else I would've stood up and continued my journey home out of the fear of coming to know this figure, but something was different. There was an air of familiarity that I drew in with each breath. It was as if I could taste her spear upon the roof of my mouth, that and the poignant stench of defeat left me collapsed upon the bench in this unusual comfort. Yes, I laid there consuming the sound of her sobbing, but oddly enough there was still more. Still something I had yet to realize. In the company of her misery, I did not feel like this was a stranger at all. I knew this person for years, yes, there was no doubt in my mind then. But how? How did I know her? These perplexing thoughts continued to bubble up inside of me until they eventually reached a fever pitch, and I couldn't help but say,

"What's wrong?"

I said as if she were close to me, not physically, but as if we were two kindred spirits confiding in one another with the utmost vulnerability. She paused at the sound of my voice and chuckled.

"Under any other circumstances, I'd just say 'oh— nothing'."

She paused to wipe her nose.

"But— it's not 'nothing' to be honest."

"It rarely is ever as simple as 'nothing'." I replied.

"Exactly— like when anyone asks how your day is and the only response you've ever been capable of giving is 'good'."

She laughed at her own response. I smiled too, it was nice to hear familiar thoughts from another mind.

"It's just so hard— so hard to be anything for anyone." She said shakily. "I bought this dress, I styled my hair, I did my makeup so carefully, all because I wanted him to see me and love me." She continued, "but if my parents had entered the restaurant at that time, they would have gasped at me and seen only a whore where their daughter was supposed to be sitting."

She continued crying. I was taken back by the things I was hearing, I opened my mouth to say something, but I truly couldn't. I couldn't because the truth of the matter was that she and I were the same, while simultaneously being inverses. Her and I both seemed to struggle with recognition, with the gaze of another pair of eyes. The difference was that her response was to become something, while I chose to be nothing at all.To become as passive as wallpaper in a room or a singular branch of a single tree in a single forest. We both suffer either way. She will be let down when her attempts fail, and I remain burdened with the fact that I never did try at all. Through all her actions and the lack thereof of mine, we both ended up on the same bench, under the same light, on the same street, in the same rotten old town.

"I could tell—" she continued after pausing to wipe her nose again. "I could tell that he was unimpressed while we were eating. The way I would ask him questions only to receive shallow responses. Or the way that I'd watch thoughts come across and leave his mind while we ate. I could tell from the way his eyes would widen, move about the room, and the way his smile would rise and then fall as his eyes dulled again."

"..."

"Why? Why? Did I do something wrong? Was it something I had said that offended him? Or the way I looked? Or even worse, was it something I didn't do? Was it that I didn't embrace him

when we first approached one another? Did I misunderstand one of his questions and fail to answer fully when we talked originally? Oh god! Why must this always happen?"

Her misery was palpable, no boutade could exculpate me from the weight of her questions. Questions I couldn't answer, nothing I could say or do could get me out of this zugzwang, so I remained silent.

"Why must you be so quiet?" She retorted. "Are you deaf? Why must everyone treat me as a specter in any room I enter?"

"Better to be a specter." I said quickly.

I wasn't sure if the immediacy of my response was a result of her command of me, or more simply a way to get her to stop talking.

"What? How dare you say such a thing."

"Well... I— " I began to say as I turned towards her to continue my point, but she interrupted me.

"Stop it! Turn away! Don't look at me!" She cried out, "My heart overflows with shame now, I look oh so ugly when I cry, please turn back as you were."

So I did, I shifted my slumped posture back away from her as it was before. I winced at the movement of my body, she must have heard, because she quieted her sobbing and asked,

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

"Yes— no, a little. It's fine." I responded between strained breaths.

She barely turned to look at me, she turned back away and continued wiping her eyes.

"That's something my old partner would've said, he was always in some sort of pain, but never willing to admit to it."

My teeth clenched at her remark. I always found people of this sort, the type to conflate you with their own negativity especially upsetting. I continued to stay quiet however, I had neither the will nor the energy to press her further.

"And I just wasn't enough for him either, you know?"

'No miss, I don't know' I thought to myself.

"When you love someone, or you think you do, you just want to give everything to them, everything becomes beautiful at first, the mundane obligations of everyday life start to develop their own intrigue. A trip to the grocery store becomes an adventure as you walk together, hand in hand, peeking at each other through aisles, exchanging furtive glances at one another. It can be so nice, so pure, so exciting. But then they pull away, life makes them lose their balance and scrape their knee, and you rush over to kiss the wound and they just swat you away. And I—."

She tried to continue speaking, but her voice broke and she fell back into her tears and sobbing.

"Must he always have to share the pain of his own absurdities with you?" I responded, "must he be obligated to shovel all his misfortunes on to her and bury her with his own dread? Is that what love is to you?"

"No," she responded, "I didn't and wouldn't ask to intrude on every sensitive thought, every uncomfortable reality. I just knew that he didn't know I was there, standing right there with arms open wide, ready to embrace him at the slightest movement he wished to. I loathe the man who is so blinded by his own misery that he fails to see any gesture of support, no matter how small or insignificant." She wiped her nose again and sniffled. "Nothing compares to the dread of waking up in the morning to find a crater next to you, unwilling to speak or act, just a depression in the mattress that you try and fill with your own love and affection, always unsuccessfully somehow. All he manages to do is rattle your own core as you fear why, why exactly he won't look at you. Why he diverts his eyes towards the blank bedside wall. What am I doing wrong? I think. Is it something I said? Something I did? The way I look? 'Oh god, does he not find me pretty anymore?' I think

to myself as I meaninglessly reach over the top of his body in an attempt to hold him, hold him down, keep him present and aware when it seems like all he'd do is just sleep each day away if he could."

"There's a beauty in a dream. Have you ever thought about that?" I responded.

"A dream? What beauty?"

"A different sort of beauty, different from the sight of an emerging sunrise, an elegant painting, or even the soft and gentle figure of bare skin running upon your fingertips. No, it is a beauty that lies fully in exactly what it is not. It's anything but real, anything but consequential. How simple it is to just close your eyes and imagine any sort of reality you wish, to sink into the marrow of that dream and be comforted by everything that is nothing." I chuckled, "The problem you see, is eventually you have to open your eyes again, and somehow the nothing that awaits you when you do arise is nowhere near as romantic and beautiful as that which you just felt a moment prior. It's addicting, it truly is, you never want to leave, you look for that dream everywhere you go, you wish oh so much that you could just be a narcoleptic. I truly spend much more time walking with my eyes closed rather than open, and I couldn't be happier really. I miss a woman, see, you and I do have something in common, but unlike you I feel no urge to search for her again, or for a love like that which we once shared. I wouldn't pursue it even if it appeared right in front of me. Because I have that dream, those thoughts, those memories. I'm not a greedy man, no, I'm content with what I've been given. And as long as I can sink into the marrow of that beautiful dream just one more time, I'll be happy once again."

—

We could have remained in silence, it wouldn't have made much of a difference to me. I'd spoken far too much anyways, I never

intended on sharing so much with this woman, but the words had already escaped my mouth, and the best thing I could do would be just not to say anything further. That would have been what I had wished for, but something unusual happened, no, something unnerving, unsettling, confusing, alarming, frightening, had happened. The woman had stopped crying.

She hadn't so much as made a single noise while I had been talking, and I had only noticed now, after the fact. All of a sudden, the silence became the most uncomfortable, that same silence that had always given me the utmost peace of mind had become an unsavory taste upon my tongue. I knew not what to do. Why exactly did the woman sit there so incredibly still, while remaining tuned away from me all the while.

The silence was broken with the slightest utterance that could have possibly left her mouth. Nonetheless, an utterance so incredibly bone chilling yet simple, nothing could have ever prepared me for that moment. Under her breath, barely audible, she said my name. I froze as I turned to find her staring directly at me. I disregarded her wish not to be seen, and I squinted with my impaired vision to behold that yes, it was in fact you.

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You, I know you not. You are a stranger in my eyes and yet a mirror in my memory. Your hair was styled very differently, your outfit unlike anything you used to wear, and yet as I peered into your mascara smeared face, I was certain it was you. To see you know, in my waking hours, outside of that dream, in a new costume, to hear your voice again and the words you had spoken. I listened to you on that bench more than I ever had before. You're no stranger, anything but just a figure in the night, you were more real in that moment than I'd ever been before. I winced at the realization that my dream, my comfort in nothing, had been shattered beyond repair in an instant. Everything I believed you

were, everything I chose to remember, all of it became lost the second I recognized you sitting there. Every intricate detail of your being protruded and became the most apparent, I saw in you a misery I had never realized before, desires of the simplest of embraces from those in your heart and mind. I winced again at the realization that you, in that dream, wasn't even you at all. How could it be that the figure of my imaginations was really so alienated from the woman who beholden me there on that bench. I've been searching for comfort in a ghost, a person who couldn't be any less real. In that dream where I chased after you on the beach, I now know not who or even what I was running after. The woman who I watched bring the glass of water to her lips while we lay in bed on that morning, the woman unerring my room and running her fingers down my arm while I lay there ill, wasn't a woman at all, for she made no sound, uttered no words, had no voice. That figure was no more than a projection of my deepest, half realized fantasies. There's no pain in the comfort of a dream so delusional as long as you don't allow yourself to wake up from it. I happened to be unlucky enough to emerge from it the second I recognized your face on that bench. What is left for me now? My one comfort, my one protector from the butter aftertaste of a long, arduous day has been shattered into a million pieces. Yet this was not the most damning reality setting in, that was the fact that you, as you were on that bench, were further away than you'd ever been before. Much further than when you were on the beach, much further than when you entered from the other side of the room. Yes, you as you appeared to me in that moment were so far off in the distance that I was unsure if it was even you at all. I dare not run, reach out, or try and search again for you now. Nothing could possibly be a bigger waste of time. I knew at that moment that when I returned to my apartment, full of unwanted possessions, that no walls could enclose my wounds, no sheets could be pulled

over my head to hide from the fact that I've been dreaming of a ghost. And yet I still tried, I still closed my eyes tightly and waited to sink into the marrow of that dream, panicking at my inability to. I realized it was true, oh so true, that all my choices, all my beliefs, all my actions, supported and reinforced the undeniable fact that I would rather will nothingness than not will at all.

End.