

**Separately, Connectedly: Exploring Trauma Through Ekphrasis
in Contemporary Novels**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Alexandra Cannon, hereby declare that this thesis, and the work presented herein is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is clearly stated.

Signed: *Alexandra Cannon*

Date: 18 December 2022

*Dedicated in grateful and loving memory of Charlie Schenk
— storyteller, cardtable menace, and mensch —
who had patience for no one, but waited for me.*

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Abstract

This thesis examines ekphrasis as a rhetorical tool to explore, represent, and contemplate trauma affect in contemporary novels. From the Greek phrase for ‘description,’ ekphrasis is part of a long and ancient literary tradition, dating as far back as the ancient depictions of art on urns, weaponry, as well as more disambiguated descriptions of scenes and people.¹ The uses of ekphrasis as a literary device are broad and complex,² but its use is under-researched in contemporary novels, and there is a near total absence of investigation into ekphrasis within the novel as a means of contemplating and understanding the affect of a condition that is inherently abstract and disorienting.

Literary trauma theory has evolved considerably in recent years. In keeping with important findings in psychology and psychiatric research, there is a broad recognition that rethinking trauma representation beyond the recitation and reliving of events and into textured descriptions of trauma affect is essential for thoughtful, nuanced explorations of an experience that resists narrative convenience.³ As a result, there are increased calls to accept and represent its inherent fractured nature and resist the authorial temptation to forge a story around it that fits neatly into a cohesive whole.

This thesis proposes a framework for considering how various aspects of ekphrastic descriptions of real and imagined art as well as their connotative and denotative significance in the novel reveals nuance in the representation of trauma affect through the activation of language and image. The contemporary novels explored herein are: *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt, *What I Loved* by Siri Hustvedt, and

¹ Shari Bartsch, *Decoding the Ancient Novel: The Reader and the Role of Description in Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) pp. 9-10.

² Valentine Cunningham, ‘Why Ekphrasis?’ *Classical Philology*, Vol. 102. No. 1, (January 2007), 57-71 (pp. 57-60) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/521132>>.

³ Joshua Pederson, ‘Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory’ *Narrative*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2014), pp. 333-53 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24615578>> [Accessed 21 October 2021].

How to Be Both by Ali Smith. Each of these novels present ekphrasis and affect differently, which enables broader testing of the flexibility of the proposed framework.

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Introduction

What is trauma?

Despite nuanced, debated and evolving definitions of trauma and its hallmarks, one aspect that appears to be universally agreed upon is that it is challenging, though not impossible, to represent.⁴ Many writers and researchers have referred to an ‘unspeakable’ nature of trauma at times in a pathological sense, or even a superstitious one, stemming from the reality of trauma as a fracturing event that overwhelms, temporarily or otherwise, an individual’s ability to emotionally process and assimilate it⁵ and makes the straightforward representation of that event difficult. Even in a clinical context, trauma symptoms must be present for a prolonged period of time to warrant a formal diagnosis; the diagnosis is not predicated on the experience itself, but what happens afterward as symptoms manifest (DSM-V). Many literary narratives that include trauma instinctually focus on this aspect.

Contemporary writers are expanding upon the more prevalent trauma themes which tend to be centred around major historical events, such as the Holocaust or the Vietnam War, to explore individual traumas that are not necessarily a by-product of global crisis but are instead an acknowledgement of what are perhaps less historically-motivated triggers, such as loss or abuse, without also losing sight of broader sociopolitical causes and implications.⁶ This is in keeping with current psychological theory and understanding of trauma onset and affect, which also acknowledges that trauma can be individual, and its manifestations abstruse.⁷ It is in the investigation of trauma affect that ekphrasis can be effective in reflecting and evoking ambiguity,

⁴ Constance J Dalenberg, ‘Speaking Trauma: The Inadequacy of Language in Trauma Treatment’, in *Countertransference and the Treatment of Trauma* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2000), pp. 57-84 <<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/10380-000>>. In this practitioner-focused book, Dalenberg’s chapter on speaking trauma focuses on both the inadequacies and necessity of language in a clinical setting.

⁵ George A Bonanno, Ruth Pat-Horenczyk, and Jennie Noll, ‘Coping Flexibility and Trauma: The Perceived Ability to Cope with Trauma (PACT) Scale’, *Psychological Trauma*, 3.2 (2011) 117–129, (pp. 117-119) <<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020921>>.

⁶ Gert Buelens, Sam Durant, and Robert Eaglestone, eds, *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.4.

⁷ Gene Griffin, ‘Defining Trauma and a Trauma-Informed COVID-19 Response’, *Psychological Trauma*, 12.S1 (2020), S279–S280 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000828>>.

confusion, and abstraction.⁸ Simply narrating the trigger moment is not a representation of trauma; indeed, of the novels analysed in this thesis, only one, *The Goldfinch*, describes the trigger moment in prolonged and graphic detail. All of them, however, return almost to the point of obsession to particular themes and ideas which point to the notion that a previous event has not been emotionally assimilated.

Though medically the word *trauma* may be used to refer to the moment or site of injury, standard definitions of psychological trauma refer to the resulting emotional affect of the experience. Trauma, then, is in part a question of tense: the inability to process the traumatic event keeps affect suspended.⁹ It is a past injury in the present tense. In British and American literature, individual trauma affect is often depicted directly, not only through behaviours such as dissociation, rumination, flashbacks, and at times re-enactment, but also through enactment within the narrative structure itself, most commonly in the form of fracture.

In order to discuss how trauma affect is explored in novels through ekphrasis, it is important to first identify them, to clarify the terms that constitute trauma as they are currently understood. By the same token, in a literary field that is influenced by psychological theory, it is incumbent upon literary trauma theory researchers to keep current with psychological theory. The definition of trauma has evolved considerably over time, particularly in the fields of psychology and psychiatric research. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud characterised what was then referred to as ‘traumatic neurosis’ as a ‘comprehensive general weakening and disturbance in mental abilities,’ resulting from ‘...an extensive breach of the shield against stimuli,’ typically in the form of what Freud refers to as ‘mechanical violence’, a reference to his work with soldiers returning from the First World War with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.¹⁰ Today, according to the recent American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ruth Leys and Marlene Goldman, ‘Navigating the Geneologies of Trauma, Guilt, and Affect: An Interview with Ruth Leys’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* (2010), 656-679 (p. 657-659) <<https://utpjournals.press/doi/10.3138/utq.79.2.656>>.

¹⁰ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed by Todd Dufresne, trans. by Gregory C. Richter (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Editions, 2011), pp. 49-100 (p. 55-58).

(DSM-V), there are three discrete potential triggers of the most widely-known trauma disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, and sexual violation.¹¹ The circumstances in which the exposure occurs are not limited to direct experience but also witnessing the event in person, learning the event happened to a loved one, and repeated first-hand exposure (i.e. not through media) to the details of the traumatic event, such as those witnessed by crime scene investigators or Child Protective Services workers.¹² In fact, the DSM-V recategorises Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from the anxiety disorders category to an entirely new diagnostic category, ‘Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders’.¹³ This recategorisation is indicative of a recognition within the field of psychological research that trauma is fundamentally different from anxiety, triggered through exposure to a wide range of potentially unassimilable events, and discrete enough in its affect and manifestation to deserve its own categorisation as a mental disorder.

PTSD is not the only type of trauma disorder recognised in the psychiatric community or indeed in literary trauma theory. Similarly, although the DSM-V is widely used by mental health professionals —particularly in the United States— it has faced significant criticism from mental health practitioners and researchers,¹⁴ in addition to criticisms extending from other fields.¹⁵ What is important and constructive in the context of literary trauma theory research is not attempting to ‘diagnose’, but to use the evolving knowledge, criticism, and understanding of how

¹¹ ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ in *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*, 5th edn (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013) pp. 271-280 (p. 271).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anushka Pai, Alina M Suria, and Carol S North, ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the DSM-5: Controversy, Change, and Conceptual Considerations’, *Behavioral Sciences (Basel)*, 3. Criterion A: Exposure to Trauma - 4. The Symptom Criteria (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.3390/bs7010007>>.

¹⁴ Martyn D Pickersgill, ‘Debating DSM-5: Diagnosis and the Sociology of Critique’, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 40.8 (2014), 521–25 (p. 522-523) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43283060>> [accessed 25 November 2022].

¹⁵ Samantha C. Holmes, Vanessa C. Facemire, and Alexis M. DaFonseca, ‘Expanding Criterion A for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Considering the Deleterious Impact of Oppression’, *Traumatology* (Tallahassee, Fla.), 22.4 (2016), pp. 314–21 (p. 314-316) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/trm0000104>>.

trauma is characterised and can present in order to inform its exploration and representation in literature.

Thus, for the purpose of this thesis I refer instead to a broader definition of psychological trauma as an event or ongoing circumstance that overwhelms an individual's ability to emotionally assimilate the experience or to cope.

This definition does not, however, assume that because trauma can overwhelm the ability to cope, it must therefore be 'unspeakable', a notion stemming from neuropsychological research that indicates certain aspects of trauma memory are encoded within memory at a 'non-verbal' level, primarily as sensory fragments.^{16,17} This idea permeates much of literary trauma theory and stems predominantly from the work of Cathy Caruth, as well as Shoshana Felman, Ruth Leys, and Judith Herman, among others, and came to define literary trauma theory in the 1980s and 1990s, and upon which much criticism has been predicated.¹⁸ It remains inescapable in trauma theory to this day. Susan Brison, herself a trauma survivor, takes on Caruth directly by asserting that the characterisation of trauma as 'unspeakable' is a dangerous contradiction that creates a paradox in which a survivor's ability to bear witness to her own first-hand experiences is undermined: 'This is like saying that an eloquent art critic cannot possibly enhance our understanding of a painting because the symbol systems used in painting and in language are incommensurable.'¹⁹

Psychopathology researchers may have similar grievances. Joshua Pederson points to research led in the last decade at Harvard University by clinical psychologist and experimental psychopathologist Richard McNally which has produced significant

¹⁶ Bessel van der Kolk and others, 'Dissociation, somatization, and affect dysregulation: the complexity of adaptation of trauma', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 153(1996), 83-93 (p.83-84) <<https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.153.7.83>>.

¹⁷ James W. Hopper and others, 'Neural Correlates of Reexperiencing, Avoidance, and Dissociation in PTSD: Symptom Dimensions and Emotion Dysregulation in Responses to Script-Driven Trauma Imagery', *Journal of Post-Traumatic Stress*, 20 (2007), pp. 713-25 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jts.20284>>.

¹⁸ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 266. Leys characterises Caruth's deconstructionist contention about 'massive' trauma, influenced by Bessel van der Kolk's work, as one that 'precludes all representation because the ordinary mechanisms of consciousness and memory are temporarily destroyed'.

¹⁹ Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 71.

evidence that trauma ‘amnesia’ and unspeakability are not nearly as pervasive as previously asserted.²⁰ Instead, McNally’s research indicates that although trauma can overwhelm and cause extreme dissociative experiences, and although survivors may not have the *desire* to speak about their experiences, they are, in fact perfectly capable of recalling traumatic memories and speaking to them in detail.²¹ Finally, this sentiment is echoed in Michelle Balaev’s work in which she asserts that trauma unspeakability is pathologised and theorists place so much stock in the notion of unspeakability that it has become romanticised in the literary field.²²

The definition of trauma utilised for this thesis also does not exclude less obvious types of trauma, which are not as commonly explored or represented in trauma theory, such as witnessing, effects of mental illness, loss, or emotional abuse. Robert Eaglestone, et al assert in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary and Literary and Cultural Criticism* that literary trauma theory must move away from ‘familiar, reductive accounts’ and instead consider that ‘the problem of individual psychic suffering has become “tangled up” with an array of the larger problems of modernity,’ which are not limited to the more obvious referents within literary trauma theory, such as war, genocide, and other human rights violations.²³ This is critically important in exploring affect through ekphrasis.

In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, Balaev makes the argument that looking at trauma without also considering cultural and social factors that affect memory, which is in itself subject to inaccuracies and influence, results in a limited perception of trauma.²⁴ Although these factors can be inherently historicising in nature, Balaev asserts, ‘If memory, like identity, maintains great plasticity, the continual retrieval and recitation of the traumatic event is of less importance than

²⁰ Joshua Pederson. ‘Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory’, *Narrative*, 22.3 (2014), pp. 333-353 (p. 334-40).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Michelle Balaev, ‘Trends in Literary Trauma Theory’, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 41 (2008), 149-66.

²³ Buelens, Durant, and Eaglestone, p.4.

²⁴ Michelle Balaev, *The Nature of Trauma in the American Novel*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), p36.

focusing on the present effects of the event and how the meaning of the event might be attributed in each act of remembering or retelling.²⁵ The affective nature of trauma in contemporary narratives may include the retrieval of traumatic memory, but this retrieval does not always mean retelling. More often, it means affect. For example, Margaret Atwood explores this idea in *The Blind Assassin*, in which Iris writes in a journal in which she recounts several watershed moments during her traumatic youth, which wound her still: ‘I look back over what I’ve written and I know it’s wrong’, she writes, ‘not because of what I’ve set down but because of what I’ve omitted. What isn’t there has a presence, like the absence of light.’²⁶ This ‘presence’ of past injuries that still hurt her too much is affect. Her desire to make sense of it is the reason she frequently abandons her present-day narrative to return to the most turbulent and fragmenting time of her life in an attempt to narrativise and make sense of it.

Ekphrasis and Contemplation

In *PICTURE THEORY*, W.J.T Mitchell dedicates a chapter to the idea of ekphrasis and the “other” in the sense of both semiotic (visual or physical representation) and the social (under-represented populations).²⁷ In Mitchell’s analysis, there is an extended reference to Stevens’s “Anecdote of a [sic] Jar” that is useful to examine, briefly, as it underscores an important difference between critical theory of ekphrasis and creating a critical theory for ekphrasis in a trauma affect context.

Mitchell points out that “Anecdote of the Jar” it is an ekphrastic poem. A jar on its own is not necessarily an art object, and few words are given to describe it physically (round, tall, gray, and bare), but the conscious placement of the jar, itself a contrived object, into the wilderness projects a sense of order onto the surrounding chaos. It is treated as an aesthetic object, but one that does have a function in service

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Margaret Atwood. *The Blind Assassin* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2001) p. 395.

²⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other” in *PICTURE THEORY: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 14–17.

of creating order (a major point of focus for Stevens). The wilderness is no longer wild, and the jar 'takes dominion' everywhere.

Mitchell characterises Stevens's ekphrastic description as having a "hint of the feminine" due to metaphors of both barrenness and fertility —terms, it is worth noting, that can be used to describe prolificacy in any gender — as well as the assertion that female otherness is over-represented in ekphrastic poetry which traditionally tends to assume a masculine audience (15). Stevens's description of the jar as both tall and "of a port in air" therefore merits likening it to a "phallic womb," though not in the sense that it both inserts and holds the creative act of making meaning, but in the sense that the jar is "both the erection and the visual image that provokes it" (15-16) Mitchell goes on to describe the use of the ekphrastic image here as a 'voyeuristic, masturbatory fondling', likening it to 'a kind of mental rape that may induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the observer' (17). This succeeds in sexualising an ekphrastic description of a jar and presenting the feminine as subaltern to sexist portrayal in order to make a sweeping statement about suppression and "otherness" (nature, Mitchell observes, like ekphrasis itself and like feminized objects of ekphrastic description, cannot speak for itself).

This overlooks the original point, that the jar is an art object and its description therefore ekphrastic not because of its physical description but because of the intentionality in its placement — there enlies the meaning the text leverages it to create. It is the difference between *a* jar and *the* jar. The ekphrastic description is the frame that limns the world around it, and Stevens demonstrates that the frame can bring order and structure as readily as it can introduce complication and upheaval. It isn't about making sense of things; it's about trying to make sense of things.

This is critical in exploring ekphrasis in the context of affect. It is both a rhetorical device and inherently nonlinear, and can be applied as a device to explore and contemplate trauma affect, through nuances in presentation, and at times through its application as a means to attempt to understand or make sense of trauma. Even when the plot unfolds chronologically, the forward action is suspended when the

narrative presents a description of a work of art,²⁸ and the narrative choices therein create an opportunity to explore aspects of trauma affect.²⁹ In *The Goldfinch*, Theo is in the midst of adjusting to a new life in Las Vegas with an abusive and negligent father, a growing dependence on drugs and alcohol for the distracting and numbing effect they have, and a total lack of support or healthy means in which to cope with his mother's violent death, when he looks at Fabritius's work hidden in his bedroom. The painting is tied completely to the memory of his mother and the sense of security and emotional safety she was able to provide him:

...I found myself biting back a gasp of pleasure... In the arid room—all sheetrock and whiteness—the muted colors bloomed with life; and even though the surface of the painting was ghosted over ever so slightly with dust, the atmosphere it breathed was like the light-rinsed airiness of a wall opposite an open window.³⁰

As a child, he does not yet understand what the picture means to him, but against the foreignness of his new environment, in a house situated in the desert, Theo finds respite in the comfort and beauty of the painting's muted colours, and is himself surprised at the rush of relief it brings. The dust the painting is still covered in is from the explosion; it is in context a literal product and reminder of Theo's trauma, but although it comes to Theo from an unassimilable loss, it provides him with a reprieve from it. In this, Tartt provides an example of the complexities inherent to trauma affect, effectively suspending the forward momentum of the plot whilst presenting a single emblem of Theo's present situation and what he has lost.

The private nature and clandestine struggle for resolution in a depiction of suffering from trauma affect is often shown through behaviour rather than through exposition. In each of the three novels explored in this thesis, trauma affect is depicted as hidden in some way, intentionally or otherwise, which ekphrasis can help

²⁸ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 66–90. Krieger considers ekphrasis not in terms of a verbal description of a real or imagined graphical depiction but in terms of spatial representation of what is inherently temporal through its ability to 'still' a moment.

²⁹ Cunningham, pp. 57-71 (p. 71).

³⁰ Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013). Reprinted in paperback in 2015 (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015), p. 226. Page references are to the 2015 edition.

to illuminate. To continue with Tarrt's example, Theo hides *The Goldfinch* from everyone, partly out of shame and fear, but also out of a sense of propriety. As time goes on, it becomes apparent that while *The Goldfinch* was painted hundreds of years before Theo takes it, in the context of the novel, it becomes representative of his loss and grief, and its secret nature mirrors his unaddressed and internalised affect. It is important, then, that within the context of the trauma sufferer, the ekphrastic enactment of affect becomes clear through context.

Ekphrasis can demonstrate themes of reversal and subversion through context which necessitate a return to the art as the language used to evoke it implies affect over time — in addition to exploring the non-static, fractured reality of trauma affect. Reversal refers to a subversion of what appears to be true, or the revealing of an antipodal element or idea, as is the case in *What I Loved* when the text realises that the child inside the glass coffin in Bill's mixed media artwork 'The Changeling' does not represent Leo's deceased son Matt as it initially intimates, but Bill's living son Mark, in whom Bill has recognised an inability to relate to others empathetically.³¹

Mapping Trauma Affect Through Connotative and Denotative Ekphrasis

It is unsurprising that like the term itself, the descriptors used to distinguish the types or use cases for ekphrasis are often applied differently. Taxonomies for ekphrasis are both myriad and debated; a large part of the reason for this is its application as rhetorical device requires flexibility. For example, as this thesis will demonstrate, 'denotative' and 'connotative' are important distinctions when analysing ekphrasis in a trauma affect context. In art history and in literary criticism, these terms have been used to refer to the art itself (denotative) and what it means (connotative), as well as how these ideas have shifted over time to include the process of making an art object versus a completed work.³² As definitions go, these are too

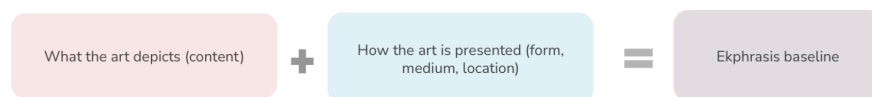
³¹ Siri Hustvedt. *What I Loved* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003). Reprinted with forward by Siri Hustvedt in 2016 (London: Sceptre, 2016), p. 342. Page references are to the 2016 edition.

³² Irene J.F. de Jong, 'Pluperfects and the Artist in Ekphrases: From the Shield of Achilles to the Shield of Aeneas (and Beyond)', *Mnemosyne*, 68.8 (2015), pp. 889–890. Pluperfects indicate the process of making the art (a more classically Greek use of the device), whereas the more common and popularised Latin refers to a completed object.

rigid for examining ekphrasis in terms of trauma affect in fiction because in such instances, ekphrasis will always ‘mean’ something,³³ and contextually, that meaning may evolve as the narrative progresses. However, exploring fiction from the nexus of literary trauma theory and ekphrasis does not require adding another term to a convoluted classification. It only requires better flexibility in framing them. If instead we consider what is denotative and what is connotative as an axis or spectrum, in which denotative is a direct depiction of a trauma event or affect, and connotative is indirect, we will have a foundation that permits the nuance necessary to explore meaning.

At surface level, then, what is denotative or connotative would mean the degree to which ekphrasis either directly conveys trauma or traumatic affect or instead relies on a more heuristic interpretation that stems from the novel’s presentation of a work that is, ostensibly, unrelated.

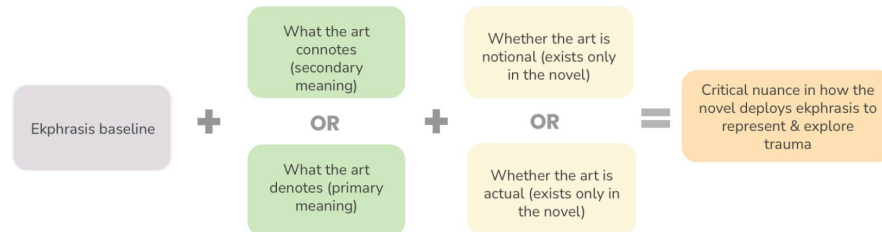
The straightforward description of a work’s content and composition can be thought of as an ekphrastic baseline in the novel. It is as close to a literal, agnostic description of art (whether or not the work exists in the world or has been invented by its author) that the novel can produce. This baseline can be thought of as the combination of both the content of the art and the way it is literally presented within the text.



In addition to the baseline, there will always be correlatives. Sometimes they are apparent in the moment, and sometimes they become apparent retrospectively or require explanation. Once the baseline is established (sometimes immediately after it is established) whether the art described is a notional or actual artwork and whether it is connotative or denotative adds thrust and critical nuance in ekphrasis as a

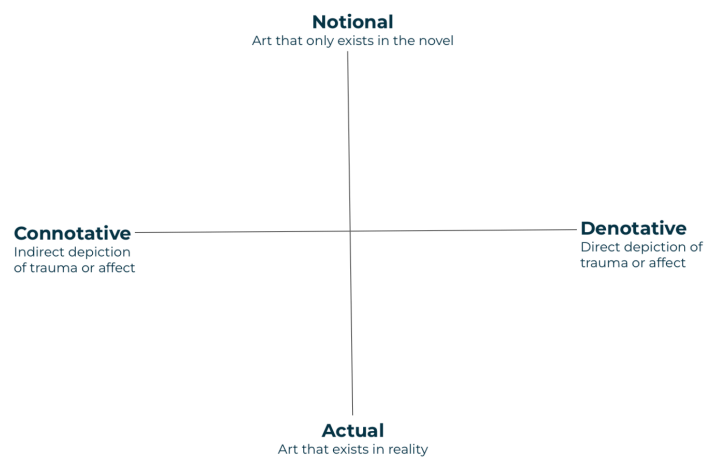
³³ James A.W. Heffernan, ‘Ekphrasis and Representation’, *New Literary History*, Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre, (Spring, 1991), pp. 297-316 (p. 299), <<https://doi.org/10.2307/469040>>. Heffernan popularised the more commonly-accepted contemporary definition of ekphrasis as a ‘verbal description of a graphical representation’.

description of trauma. Does the narrative invent a work to convey and explore affect or does it situate this representation within the real description of existing works?



I have found it useful to think about ekphrasis as a tool for considering and exploring trauma affect in terms of these ideas as intersecting spectrums that can help map and reveal important nuance in the exploration and demonstration of trauma affect.

Although it may initially seem unlikely that “actual” and “notional” art could be considered a spectrum (either the art exists in the real world or it does not), the novels examined in this thesis often blur that line through drastically shifting



the physical-spatial context in which it is presented, or fictional changes made to the art itself, thereby introducing an element of notional ekphrasis to an otherwise very real work of art. As this framework is intended to be used to explore the way ekphrastic descriptions are leveraged in relation to trauma, it does not present an axis or lens to contextualise macro themes (such as the interplay between facets of identity and social structures) that contribute to theoretical discourse about the nature of trauma and literature. Instead, in this thesis, I apply this framework, as well as existing forms of ekphrastic classifications and trauma theory, to demonstrate its

importance as a useful device for contemplation of trauma affect that is aligned with a contemporary understanding of the fracturing nature of trauma.

Selected Texts and Rationale

Just as the DSM has numerous malcontents, so too does the ‘trauma plot’, the novel that relies on trauma as an explanation for attitudes and behaviour that so predominantly define a character that trauma, in effect, subsumes the character’s identity. Such novels, Parul Sehgal argues, oversimplify rather than add dimension to characters: ‘The trauma plot flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and, in turn, instructs and insists upon its moral authority.’³⁴ Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*³⁵ (which Sehgal mentions) and Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Small Backs of Children*³⁶ are primary examples of novels that both contain ekphrasis and feature characters that not only experience serial complex traumas, but whose identities are principally defined by the effects of trauma, with the revelation of prior injury a primary driver of the plot. Sehgal contends that ‘[u]nlike the marriage plot, the trauma plot does not direct our curiosity toward the future (*Will they or won’t they?*) but back into the past (*What happened to her?*).’³⁷ In such novels, ekphrasis is leveraged not for contemplation and exploration, but for exposition: the reader is told what to think. As a contribution to the field, the framework I propose for revealing and exploring critical nuance in the ways novels deploy ekphrasis cannot be applied to works in which ekphrasis is leveraged principally to explain or otherwise eliminate nuance.

It is crucial to acknowledge that depicting trauma and its affect within a novel is not one and the same as ‘the trauma plot’. To categorise any work that represents or reveals prior trauma as a trauma plot lacks critical rigor and achieves the same dismissive, flattening effect that Sehgal laments in individual characters that are solely defined by trauma. Trauma, whether experienced or witnessed, is part of the human

³⁴ Parul Sehgal, ‘The Case Against the Trauma Plot’, *The New Yorker*, (2021) <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot>> [accessed 23 May 2023] (para 26 of 26).

³⁵ Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 2015).

³⁶ Lidia Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2016).

³⁷ Sehgal, (para 4 of 26).

experience, and its depiction and exploration in literature is not new, despite shifts in understanding and vernacular. An author can allow that trauma does influence behaviour and perspective without making this the identity of a character or the main driver of plot. Although it is demonstrably possible to speak about and recover from trauma, the experience itself is a fracture, and resists many of the conveniences of contemporary storytelling. This is a key reason why authors continue to explore it.

Ekphrasis, as a device, is about expressing and perceiving vividness, particularly in art, and the ways in which it is presented can reveal important nuance in the exploration of trauma within novels. The works examined in this thesis are *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt, *What I Loved* by Siri Hustvedt, and *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith. These texts were selected for their potential to demonstrate the flexibility of ekphrasis as a rhetorical device across a range of trauma contexts and explorations of the ways in which trauma can upend and unmoor perceptions of the external world, as well as expressions of internal landscapes. Trauma alone is not relied upon as a merely a plot device nor as the primary identity of the characters that experience it, and all three novels feature visual art (and therefore ekphrasis) extensively. Furthermore, when and how ekphrasis is leveraged in each novel varies as do trauma and perceptual contexts: From the point of view of protagonists that are unable to verbalise their trauma and may not be fully conscious of it despite an awareness of their suffering, like Theo in *The Goldfinch*, to characters that are extremely self-aware and have a tendency to intellectualise even their most complex feelings, like Leo in *What I Loved*, to protagonists whose defining characteristics are, in many ways, liminal or ambiguous, like George and Franchesco in *How to Be Both*.

Chapter 1

'...the keystone that held the whole cathedral up': Spatial Contextual Ekphrasis in *The Goldfinch*

In his seminal work on ekphrasis, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, James A.W. Heffernan repeatedly qualifies ekphrasis as inherently prosopopoeial: the verbal description frees the narrative impulse which also speaks for the silent art.³⁸ Ekphrastic prosopopoeia makes sense in the context of most poetic ekphrasis, which does not often provide or indeed require much additional context; the narrative and the prosopopoeia tend to exist within the description of the art. However, the function of ekphrasis as prosopopoeial takes on a different meaning entirely when positioned within the narrative prose of a novel. Instead of only speaking for the art itself or limiting its context to the art itself, ekphrastic prose can give voice to other unexpressed elements within the greater context of the novel. In Donna Tartt's 2013 novel *The Goldfinch*, ekphrasis is used to represent Theo's trauma through the application of what Hans Lund has termed 'spatial contextual ekphrasis',³⁹ or the relation of the art described to its immediate physical surroundings. The spatial context of Fabritius's painting, in addition to its narrative context, directly reflects Theo's traumatic affect through his decision to keep it hidden and accessible, and at different times near him or away from him. This use of ekphrasis expands on Heffernan's original idea of the prosopopoeial function of ekphrasis to include a means to represent or convey an unspoken traumatic affect.

In his review of *The Goldfinch*, Philip Hensher questions the believability of Theo's decision to hold onto Fabritius's painting as something inextricably associated with his mother, as opposed to any of her personal possessions, which he surrenders without much objection or fanfare. The answer according to Hensher is that it is a

³⁸ James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: the Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Reference to this work refer to a reprinted edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 111. See also Heffernan's 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1991), p. 304.

³⁹ Hans Lund, 'Ekphrastic Linkage and Contextual Ekphrasis' in *Pictures into Words: Theoretical and Descriptive Approaches to Ekphrasis*, ed. by Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), pp. 173-188, p. 177.

convenient plot device Tarrt deploys to draw her protagonist into the criminal underbelly of the art world, and in so doing sacrifices ‘psychological plausibility...to the demands of a furiously exciting story.’⁴⁰ While the high-action climax of the novel is extraordinary and in keeping with Tarrt’s characteristically ordered cause-and-effect style, the assertion that Theo’s choice to keep the picture with him merely as a means to control the trajectory of the story toward a shootout in the Netherlands misses the broader point: Theo does not keep the painting because he associates it with his mother, he keeps it because he associates it with his mother *and* her loss, and he is clearly positioned to do so through the spatial contextual ekphrasis that positions the picture—an object of great personal importance to Theo’s mother—as the last thing Theo sees with her and a relic of the blast that kills her. There are two distinct spatial contextual ekphrastic descriptions of the painting ‘The Goldfinch’⁴¹ on the day Theo’s primary trauma occurs. The first is presented immediately before the explosion and the second occurs immediately after the explosion, in the confusing aftermath in which Theo recovers the painting.

The morning Theo’s mother, Audrey, is killed contains many intimations of coming tragedy which lead up to the first instance of spatial contextual ekphrasis. Tarrt is intentional in increasing the tension and general sense of malaise throughout the series of events leading up to the moment Theo first lays eyes on *The Goldfinch* in person: a ride in a taxi with a reckless driver, a sudden and debilitating headache that forces Audrey to ask the driver to pull over, and an onslaught of inclement weather that forces mother and son to seek shelter inside the Met to wait out the storm. Within this uneasy surrounding context, inside the Dutch Masters exhibition, Theo notices that the paintings become more fantastical the further they venture into the rooms, moving from portraits of ladies and merchants to ‘[r]uined banquet tables littered with peeled apples and walnut shells...trompe l’oeils with crawling insects and striped flowers,’ intimating the coming chaos that is the aftermath of the

⁴⁰ Philip Hensher, ‘Donna Tarrt Can Do the Thrills but Not the Trauma’, *The Spectator*, 12 Oct. 2013, www.spectator.co.uk/article/donna-tarrt-can-do-the-thrills-but-not-the-trauma.

⁴¹ Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654, oil on panel, 33.5 x 22.8 cm, Maritshuis, The Hague. References in the body of this thesis to this painting are in single quotations (‘The Goldfinch’) to avoid confusion with the novel *The Goldfinch*.

explosion. Thus, by the critical moment in which Theo's mother discusses the Dutch masters, including Fabritius, and introduces by name the concept of *natures mortes*, the reader has already been presented with several. Audrey unknowingly cements the context of her own impending death:

They want it all as detailed as possible because even the tiniest things mean something. Whenever you see flies or insects in a still life—a wilted petal, a black spot on the apple—the painter is giving you a secret message. He's telling you that living things don't last—it's all temporary. Death in life. That's why they're called *natures mortes*. Maybe you don't see it at first with all the beauty and bloom, the little speck of rot. But if you look closer—there it is (24).

This speech sets up a fair amount of foreshadowing and a sense of unease, as the reader already knows Audrey is about to die (though not how). Although the paintings that contain the *natures mortes* that Audrey references are not described in great detail, they are a contextual foreshadowing of darker moments to come even beyond the triggering incident of the explosion. That Audrey points to specific examples of insects, a wilted petal, and a blemished apple in effect introduces these *natures mortes* into the context of *The Goldfinch* beyond the present moment; her ekphrastic description itself acts as a 'hidden message' within the text. Furthermore, Audrey is most enthusiastic about seeing *The Goldfinch* in person as she explains to Theo that this is the painting that sparked her interest in art, in effect providing the framework for Theo to associate *The Goldfinch* with his mother as a reminder of who she was, and of her absence.

The contextual ekphrastic description of the milieu in which Theo first sees the picture juxtaposes the rooms of the exhibition with the signature high ceilings and echoing spaciousness of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Theo notes that the rooms 'were chilly and hushed, with lowered ceilings, and none of the palatial roar and echo of the Great Hall. Though the exhibition was moderately crowded, still it had the sedate, meandering feel of a backwater, a certain vacuum-sealed calm: long sighs and extravagant exhalations like a room full of students taking a test'.⁴² Describing the calm as 'vacuum-sealed' and likening it to a room full of students taking a test

⁴² Tartt, p. 24.

combined with lowered ceilings imbues the sedate environment with a claustrophobic, underlying tension. *The Goldfinch* is positioned here, among other paintings and without a special place of honour or elevation from the rest. It is initially so nondescript that Audrey, who has been seeking the picture, stops short when she comes across it, causing Theo, distracted by his first sighting of Pippa and Welty, to nearly walk right into his mother.

‘The Goldfinch’ was dated 1654,⁴³ the same year as Carel Fabritius’s death, and it is directly in front of the painting that Audrey refers to the gunpowder factory explosion that killed Fabritius and destroyed his studio. This early context positions Theo to recognise similarities between himself and the goldfinch:

...random disasters, mine and his, converging on the same unseen point, the *big bang* as my father called it...You could study the connections for years and never work it out—it was all about things coming together, things falling apart...’⁴⁴

Theo’s ability to later reflect on these similarities and draw connections from what may appear at first glance to be disparate events support the parallel conclusion that Theo himself and ‘The Goldfinch’, as survivors of their maker’s deaths, are similarly connected, provoking a deeper consideration of the physical painting as a representation of Theo’s trauma. This conclusion appears to be within reach for Theo, though he never states it outright, instead tending to keep the similarities between himself and the painting intentionally on the periphery of his consideration of the work. This narrative choice underscores the effect of the narrator’s ongoing and unacknowledged trauma: to consider fully the similarities between himself and the painting would also jeopardise the sense of solace the painting gives him later.

Laurence Buell refers to the concept of place as a gesture ‘in at least three directions at once—toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond.’⁴⁵ In the moments before the

⁴³ Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654, oil on panel. The date was added by the painter after his signature.

⁴⁴ Tartt, p. 305.

⁴⁵ Lawrence Buell. ‘Space, Place and Imagination from Local to Global’, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 62-96 (p. 63).

explosion, *The Goldfinch* is physically situated among all three: the material environment that is the physical location of Theo's primary trauma, the social tension between his interest in Pippa and the responsibility to listen to his mother, and the coming traumatic affect which creates a bond between Theo and the picture as well as a lifelong attachment for Theo to Pippa. While listening to Theo's mother discuss *The Goldfinch*, Pippa notices the chain around the bird's ankle, and asks Welty if the bird has to live its whole life like that. The relevance of this statement in relation to Pippa becomes clear later on as Theo harbours a largely hidden unrequited love for her, an obsession that appears to stem directly from their shared trauma which Pippa must also live with. Welty responds to Pippa's question with a crucial observation: "Such a mysterious picture, so simple. Really tender—invites you to stand close, you know? All those dead pheasants back there and then this little living creature".⁴⁶ This prosopopoeial spatial-contextual ekphrasis reinforces Audrey's foreshadowing language as it also comes to represent Theo's circumstances as a helpless individual surrounded by death. Therefore, the spatial context of the ekphrasis is critical in positioning *The Goldfinch* to represent Theo's trauma.

The second spatial contextual ekphrastic description of *The Goldfinch* is presented in the chaotic aftermath of the explosion. Upon regaining consciousness, Theo does not understand where he is as the entire surrounding environment has undergone a violent change. What at first blush appears to be an abandoned, walled-in tenement housing courtyard is quickly revealed to in fact be the Dutch Masters exhibition at The Met, which Theo describes as 'a ragged white cave,' with a 'deep, innate wrongness. On one side, smoke and dust hung in a still, blanketed layer. On the other, a mass of shredded materials slanted down in a tangle where the roof, or the ceiling, should have been'.⁴⁷ It is in this desolate physical space that Theo discovers the mortally wounded and delirious Welty as well as *The Goldfinch* which Theo removes from the rubble. Initially, he does not comprehend what he is seeing in its present context '...a dusty rectangle of board, virtually invisible in the broken beams and rubbish, smaller than my laptop computer at home...It was blobbed with

⁴⁶ Tartt, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Tartt, p. 32.

drips of wax and pasted with an irregular patchwork of crumbling labels'.⁴⁸ Like Theo and like its spatial context, the painting is altered by the explosion, but it has survived. The moment Theo realises what he is holding, he makes an instant connection between the picture and his mother: 'Drawing my sleeve across the dusty surface. Tiny yellow bird, faint beneath a veil of white dust. *The Anatomy Lesson was in the same book actually but it scared the pants off me*'.⁴⁹ In the midst of the inciting moments of his trauma, Theo recovers *The Goldfinch* and connects it with his mother's words so intimately that the language does not include her words in quotes; they are italicised as Theo 'hears' them again. He responds to her aloud, before realising she is not physically present, despite his sense of her presence:

Part of her was there, but it was invisible. The invisible part was the important part. This was something I had never understood before. But when I tried to say this out loud the words came out in a muddle and I realized with a cold slap that I was wrong. Both parts had to be together.⁵⁰

Despite his general lack of coherence, the idea of an 'invisible' part of Theo's mother is accurate in an abstract way, as it represents his sense of who she is. That he is incapable of expressing this thought in his circumstances is understandable, but even years after the event he never expresses the idea in full. Even in his confusion he knows that while having known her, and having memories of her and a sense of her is important, it is far more meaningful for her to be there, physically, for him. But it is this 'invisible' part of Audrey that he is able to retain in keeping the picture, which he places in a reusable shopping bag he finds inside a purse not far from where he regains consciousness. Part of her, an indelible, invisible, but nonetheless real connection to her exists through Theo's possession of the picture. No other object in the novel is imbued with this depth of meaning and connection to Theo's understanding of his mother's life and death. Therefore, contrary to Hensher's assertion that 'The Goldfinch' is little more than a plot device, through ekphrasis, the

⁴⁸ Tartt, p. 37.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Tartt, p. 38.

picture becomes an emblem for Theo's trauma and it is this affect, not merely the attachment to the picture itself, that dictates Theo's behaviour toward it.

Hensher's question of the legitimacy of Theo's attachment to the painting may be posed differently in the broader context of the novel itself: why does Theo, who in large part refuses or is unable to confront his trauma or recall it directly, decide to safeguard a work of art which is not only an emblem of that trauma, but his possession of which is a direct output of the explosion that killed his mother? In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, Michelle Balaev argues that because trauma can impact identity and because memory is not perfectly fixed, 'then continual retrieval and recitation of the traumatic event is of less importance than focusing on the present effects of the event and how the meaning of the event might be attributed in each act of remembering or retelling.'⁵¹ Theo's character is, in many ways, founded on trauma; his story begins with it, it in large part dictates his decisions, and his story ends with coming to terms with it. Though the picture reminds him of his mother's love and is inextricably connected with the profound sense of her loss, and though Theo refuses in large part to remember the explosion or the surrounding events of that day beyond their linear retelling, it is the memory of his mother and the trauma of losing her that inspires him to keep it. The pain of keeping the picture is perhaps also a comfort because it reassures, even if only because it is still there.

Welty's dying advice to Theo is to remove 'The Goldfinch' from the rubble and to keep the painting a secret. Theo's decision to follow Welty's advice lays the groundwork for a coping strategy that carries forward into his adolescence and adulthood. In the fourteen years that Theo understands the painting to be in his possession, he only tells one other person about it — a confession he does not remember. In his quest to keep his possession of the picture hidden from others, he also learns that obfuscating the truth provides him with a sense of protection and helps him more easily attain what he wants. Theo's lack of appropriate outlets in which to recover from his trauma in a healthy way further reinforces this tendency to hide: who he is, what he does, even what he thinks are often kept from those around him. This tendency to close himself off in response to his trauma is represented

⁵¹ Balaev, pp. 36–37.

multiple times through the aid of spatial-contextual ekphrasis, which centres around Theo's desperate efforts to keep the picture's location hidden.

It is important to examine the events that lead into the spatial-contextual ekphrasis that reinforces the representation of trauma in *The Goldfinch* to more fully ascertain Theo's traumatic affect. In the weeks following the explosion, Theo has some distraction from the loss of his mother as he adjusts to life with the Barbours and befriends Hobie and Pippa. During this time, Theo's thoughts are not focused on the painting; the changes he must adjust to are too new. Though life with the Barbours is divorced from the day-to-day life he knew before his mother's death, he does not experience a profound sense of unreality until he returns to school, where even the most mundane details are coloured by her death and, critically, become for Theo potential pathways to return to a time before it:

The strange thing: the last day I'd been in the building, she was alive. I kept on thinking it, and every time it was new: last time I opened this locker, last time I touched this stupid fucking *Insights in Biology* book, last time I saw Lindy Maisel putting on lip gloss with that plastic wand. It seemed hardly credible that I couldn't follow these moments back to a world where she wasn't dead.⁵²

These activities in school are so intimately connected to his life with his mother that it seems impossible to be able to continue doing them with such a critical element missing. Moreover, it is clear that the familiar —reminders of what his life used to be — is triggering, and that subconsciously, Theo is trying to reestablish a connection with his mother. This amplifies a cruel irony: because Theo's trauma divides his life into distinct eras of Before and After, it becomes simultaneously the wedge that separates him from his life before his mother died, and the bridge that connects his life in the aftermath to the one he has lost.

Given Theo's desire to return to his life with his mother and the established association he has between her and 'The Goldfinch', it is understandable that a total departure from the life he has known by moving with his father and Xandra to Las Vegas would bring the picture back to the forefront. Before departing New York, in his initial desperation to hide the picture from his father, he drapes a mildewy towel over

⁵² Tartt, p. 89.

it and tells his father it's a poster.⁵³ —This is the first active decision Theo makes to protect knowledge of the painting's existence. Prior to this, Theo makes decisions to omit information, but never lies outright.

Theo's sense of unreality deepens further when his father and Xandra enter his life, and take him to live with them in Las Vegas. The desert landscape is barren and alien, intimating the emptiness and hostile environment that encompass Theo's life following the explosion. His bedroom is likewise large and anonymous, with a feeling so empty and lonely, that Theo leaves his closet door open just to see his clothing hanging inside.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Theo's life in Las Vegas is traumatising in its own right: his father is neglectful to the point that Theo becomes malnourished and he is offered no support to help cope with his primary trauma except through his friendship with Boris who himself is regularly abused by his own father and whose numbing techniques of drinking and drug usage quickly become Theo's sole coping mechanism outside of looking at the painting. The picture, however, which has up until this point been a source of more anxiety than relief, suddenly offers an unexpected respite. Through its unchanging nature and comforting familiarity of its colours and content, the painting provides Theo with the sense of stability he lacks. '...at some strange point, when I'd looked at it long enough, eyes dry from the refrigerated desert air, all space seemed to vanish between me and it so that when I looked up it was the painting and not me that was real'⁵⁵. The painting has the power to reorder reality for Theo, to provide a sense of rightness, and given the unacceptability of Theo's current reality, it is perhaps easier for him to view the 'The Goldfinch' as more real than he is.

Within the bleak setting of his life in Las Vegas, and understanding from Hobie that dry air is damaging to antiques and that they should be touched as infrequently as possible, Theo protects the picture as best as he can by wrapping it in two layers of clean dishcloths and several sheets of archival paper and stores it inside a clean pillowcase which he duct tapes to the back of his headboard. This decision to keep the painting as physically close to him as possible is both a product of the necessity of the

⁵³ Tartt, p. 190.

⁵⁴ Tartt, p. 225.

⁵⁵ Tartt, p. 304.

environment in which he now lives as well as a desire to keep his mother's memory close and protected. During the years in Las Vegas when Theo regularly looks at the picture, it in no way triggers his traumatic memories. On the contrary, it is a source of great comfort for him, a secret solace with which he can interact. At one point he recalls that the goldfinch in the picture seemed to gaze at him, 'with shiny, changeless eyes,' with a verve that evokes a living being, though a changeless one. The changelessness of the bird's gaze intimates the stability, safety, and feeling of being seen that Theo lacks in his day-to-day home life. The characterisation is not unlike the early descriptions he provides of Audrey as a warm provider and guardian. However, nearly 15 years have elapsed between the time Theo lives in Las Vegas, and the time he narrates his story, and this distance enables him to intimate that he shares an uncomfortable likeness with the goldfinch's situation. Theo goes on to explain:

When I looked at the painting I felt the same convergence in a single point: a sunstruck instant that existed now and forever. Only occasionally did I notice the chain on the finch's ankle, or think what a cruel life for a little living creature—fluttering briefly, forced always to land in the same hopeless place.⁵⁶

In zeroing in on the vividness of the painting and how this produces the feeling that it is a living object, a teenage Theo overlooks what, at the time, he considers to be lifeless details, including the dimensions of the picture and visual details within the work that are at odds with the safe feeling that seeing the art gives him, most pointedly the fact that the goldfinch is there against its will as it must be chained to its post, tethered literally to a 'hopeless' place. Indeed, in glancing at the painting, the fact that the bird is chained in place is not immediately apparent. But in his need to maintain the sense of safety and relief that the painting gives him, Theo must overlook this detail—hide it from his conscious awareness—or risk confronting his unaddressed trauma. Theo's ekphrastic description is therefore a prosopopoeial signifier of his trauma: it juxtaposes the chain around the bird's ankle with Theo's difficult life in Las Vegas. Both the chain and Theo's trauma are not directly obvious, and while both figures are meant to experience agency, to move forward freely, neither

⁵⁶ Tartt, p. 306.

can. Therefore, the spatial context of the picture is again shown to be necessary in the ekphrastic representation of Theo's trauma.

Furthermore, that the picture, unchanging and familiar, is a comfort to Theo and it is 'reassuring' in its immutability, harkens back to the 'invisible' part of Theo's mother that he senses in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. Given how the novel first introduces 'The Goldfinch' by using Audrey's voice to describe it, it is reasonable to conclude that the reassuring nature of the picture also stems from the memory of the security and care Audrey provided—something Theo cannot articulate to—or attribute to—his father. This conclusion is reinforced later in the text as, amid an ekphrastic description of the picture, Theo again attempts to describe the emotional impact of the painting: '...almost immediately its glow enveloped me, something almost musical, an internal sweetness that was inexplicable beyond a deep, blood-rocking harmony of rightness, the way your heart beat slow and sure when you were with a person you felt safe with and loved'.⁵⁷ At this point in the novel, Audrey is the only provider in Theo's life who has given him a feeling of safety and love. In order to protect and preserve this sense of her through viewing the painting, Theo must keep it hidden.

Part III of the novel begins with an epigraph attributed to François de La Rochefoucauld: 'We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others, that in the end, we become disguised to ourselves.' This maxim is demonstrated in Theo's behavioural patterns as, in the absence of his only close friend and confidant, he finds ways to retreat further into himself while adjusting to life with Hobie in Manhattan. He reverts to the previous strategy he employed with the Barbours: attempting to be as useful and unobtrusive as possible to limit the chance that he will become a burden that Hobie feels the need to unload even though Hobie, like the Barbours, never indicates he feels this way.⁵⁸ As this is the fourth home Theo has known in two years, it is understandable he would feel protective of his way of life now that he is in a safer and more predictable environment than the one he knew in his father's custody. However, returning to New York, the location of his primary trauma, sharpens the

⁵⁷ Tartt, p. 317.

⁵⁸ Tartt, p. 394-397.

feelings of guilt he has in retaining his possession of the painting. He knows that Hobie, unlike his father and Xandra, would recognise the Fabritius for what it is, so out of fear, he does not unwrap it to look at it, and instead keeps it under his bed, which happens to be in Welty's old office. The previous owner of the space where the picture is located was with Theo at the epicentre of his trauma, and in fact is the reason Theo picks up the painting in the first place.

In her review of *The Goldfinch*, Michiko Kakutani refers to the picture as a 'talisman' of Theo's mother.⁵⁹ Indeed, during this time in Theo's life, it is less important for him to be able to see *The Goldfinch* than to simply know it is there, again reinforcing the import of spatial contextual ekphrasis as a means for the text to convey Theo's traumatic affect: 'I got on my knees and reached under the bed to put my hands on the pillowcase...blindly and at erratic interludes, to make sure it was still there...' (398). He no longer experiences the relief of gazing at the picture; instead he safeguards it with an increasing anxiety of losing it. This represents a marked change in his behaviour toward it in New York as opposed to Las Vegas. While in both locations, it is critical that the picture is physically as near as possible to him within a private space that is his, in an environment in which he has no real guardianship, he looks at the picture frequently as it recalls his mother to him and the sense of rightness and security that her presence had given him. In New York however, with Hobie as a benevolent though absent-minded caregiver, this is unnecessary (and more risky). Like Theo's own trauma, the picture remains unaddressed and, because of this, increasingly a source of stress. Kakutani's classification of the picture as a talisman is particularly interesting as by nature talismans are both representative of a belief and functional in an occult or spiritual practice. For Theo, 'The Goldfinch' certainly represents his mother, and acts as a talisman through its ability to reassure that it — she — is still there. As his trauma is inextricably connected with the loss of his mother, keeping a talisman of her also means keeping a talisman of his primary trauma.

⁵⁹ Michiko Kakutani, 'A Painting as Talisman, as Enduring as Loved Ones Are Not', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2013, <www.nytimes.com/2013/10/08/books/the-goldfinch-a-dickensian-novel-by-donna-tartt.html> [accessed 11 May 2022].

Theo makes no effort to reconnect with people he knew in New York other than Hobie and Pippa, both of whom he knows in the aftermath of his trauma. The Barbours and his old friends did not write to him much while he was living in Las Vegas, and he feels abandoned by them. However, as other art thieves are caught, Theo makes the decision for the first time to remove the picture from his immediate vicinity in order to protect it and to protect himself from potential prosecution by storing it in a pup tent inside a storage locker, and immediately following this deposit of his most prized possession, he attempts to visit the apartment building where he used to live with his mother.⁶⁰ The notion of his mother is a composite of the memories of a thirteen-year-old boy which fix her forever as a provider, guardian, and friend. This is represented in Theo's assumption that anything evocative of his life with her will also somehow remain unchanged. While geographically, locations of the storage locker and Theo's childhood home are not far from each other, it is significant that Theo only attempts to return to the location of his lost life after surrendering the physical possession of the talisman that evokes the security of his life there. Instead, he finds a building under construction with an entryway full of rubble and a broken concrete interior reminiscent of the spatial contextual ekphrastic description of the damaged environment where he first holds 'The Goldfinch' in the wreckage of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He solidifies the unmoored feeling he now has in realising he has truly lost the home he once knew: '[e]ven the sidewalk felt like it might break under my feet and I might drop through Fifty-Seventh Street into some pit where I never stopped falling'.⁶¹ This feeling is antithetical to the one Theo describes when he is able to look at the painting, particularly the 'blood-rocking rightness' and firm sense of reality that looking at the picture gives him. Now that he is without it his environment and attempts to reconnect with his lost life mirror its irretrievability.

⁶⁰ Tartt, pp. 424-426.

⁶¹ Tartt, pp. 428.

Delores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Alu e point out that trauma should never be considered a ‘stable and immobile notion,’⁶² meaning that while it is possible to define a contextual framework for defining trauma, it is important to bear in mind that it is a decidedly slippery topic. This caveat can also apply to the understanding of individual instances of trauma. Even in the clinical sense of trauma as presented in diagnoses of Acute Stress Disorder or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, trauma affect can be immediate or delayed by years, and can present differently over time.⁶³ This interdisciplinary understanding of the complexity of traumatic affect provides a useful framework for considering how drastically Theo’s behaviour toward the painting differs between Las Vegas and New York, as well as the ostensibly contrarian feelings of wanting to rid himself of the painting (and potential legal implications of being caught with it) and his degree of desperation to regain possession of it when he learns it is missing, while his broader behavioural patterns remain largely the same.

Theo returns to the anonymous storage locker in an attempt to hide the pills he has come to rely upon in a place that is physically difficult for him to reach. He wants to quit but cannot bring himself to throw the drugs away. While there, he combats the urge to view the painting again (which remains painstakingly wrapped and sealed with duct tape), drawing a clear parallel between Theo’s ‘need’ for the painting and addiction-based coping behaviour he employs to feel functional. The painting is part of his identity, but a part he hides from the rest of the world; he knows there is too much risk involved in making his possession of the painting known to others, that if he were to be found out, he could face felony charges. Yet despite these certainties, he cannot brook the idea of surrendering the picture. Moreover, he relates to it as a pitiful, neglected object, known best to the rest of the world for its ostensible destruction in a terror attack. ‘...[it] had a ragged, poignant, oddly personal look, less like an inanimate object than some poor creature bound and

⁶² Dolores M Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allu e, eds, *Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny: Trauma and Ethics in Contemporary British and American Literature* (Heidelberg: Universit atsverlag Winter, 2011), pp. 12–13.

⁶³ Jonathan I Bisson, and others, ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,’ *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 351, (2015), p. 1 <www.jstor.org/stable/26523549> [Accessed 8 May 2023].

helpless in the dark, unable to cry out and dreaming of rescue'.⁶⁴ Theo does not villainise himself for the role he plays as possessor of *The Goldfinch* in this personification of the painting, leaving the reader to make the connection between the painting's dilemma in both its spatial context and subject matter, and Theo's enshacklement to his own trauma, his need for the painting as a talisman; the convergence of what he lost, when he lost it, and who he has become since then.

Around the time Theo stores the picture, he begins to become more serious about quitting his drug habit, he finds himself without much reason to follow through: 'the remainder of your un-opiated life stretch[es] out bleakly ahead of you like a prison corridor, you [need] some fairly compelling reason to keep moving forward into darkness...'.⁶⁵ The trauma affect that Theo suffers still threatens to derail his ability to function, so he buries it under the effects of painkillers. However, when Theo learns that Boris had stolen the painting from him before he ever left Las Vegas and that the wrapped item he has been so carefully guarding in the storage locker is an old textbook, he suffers a profound sense of loss that not even his drug abuse can blunt:

All these years I'd drifted along too glassy and insulated for any kind of reality to push through: a delirium which had run me along on its slow, relaxed wave since childhood, high and lying on the shag carpet in Vegas laughing at the ceiling fan, only I wasn't laughing any more, I was Rip van Winkle wincing and holding his head on the ground about a hundred years too late.⁶⁶

This moment of separation from the painting is the first in which Theo admits his desperate refusal to face reality by fully processing (or attempting to fully process) his mother's death and his survival of a terror attack. He implies awareness that the majority of his behaviour is centred around staving off the full force of his trauma, so much so that there is no room for *any* 'kind of reality to push through'. Again the reader is reminded that Theo's trauma comprises part of his identity, and it is here that it is revealed that Theo does not confront it not only because it would unravel his tenuous sense of identity, but it would irreparably destroy the 'glassy and insulated'

⁶⁴ Tartt, p. 474.

⁶⁵ Tartt, p. 473.

⁶⁶ Tartt, p. 559.

reality he has created for himself in order to function. And indeed it does: after describing the deluge of loss and pain he experiences after Boris's confession, Theo asks himself 'What way was there to make it okay?' to which he admits: 'None.'⁶⁷

The ekphrasis employed up until this point has positioned the picture to be an emblem of Theo's loss and a 'talisman' of his mother, but in proving to Theo that he really stole the painting, Boris shows him a picture of the verso of the painting on his mobile:

...distinctive as a fingerprint: rich drips of sealing wax, brown and red; irregular patchwork of European labels (Roman numbers; spidery, quilled signatures)... The crumbling yellows and browns were layered with an almost organic richness, like dead leaves.⁶⁸

The spatial context of the ekphrasis presented is chilling: Theo sees the back of his prized possession, more real than real, alive to him, on a friend's iPhone screen. Here the text underscores the distance from the picture, not only physically, but through the cold anonymity of a mobile device, a piece of technology that did not come into existence until centuries after 'The Goldfinch' was painted, making its rendering of the verso and Boris's eye-rolling, casual flippancy in presenting it almost vulgar, a violation of a part of the picture that only Theo and those who have physically held it would be able to recognise, particularly as Theo uses living, human characteristics to describe the verso in likening it to a fingerprint and noting its colours are imbued with an almost organic richness.

The application of spatial contextual ekphrasis fosters a believability in Theo's self assessment of what possession of the painting means to his identity:

The painting had made me feel less mortal... It was support and vindication; it was sustenance and sum. It was the keystone that held the whole cathedral up. And it was awful to learn, by having it so suddenly vanish from under me, that all my adult life I'd been privately sustained by that great, hidden, savage joy: the conviction that my whole life was balanced atop a secret that might at any moment, blow it apart.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 559.

⁶⁸ Tartt, p. 557.

⁶⁹ Tartt, p. 559.

The use of the phrase 'blow it apart' directly references Theo's primary trauma. Here the long-divivive Freudian concept of the 'repetition compulsion,' or the tendency among some trauma survivors to recreate or reenact their traumas,⁷⁰ is called to mind as Theo views his situation as intentionally 'balanced atop' a hidden, underlying instability that could destroy his life as he knows it. There is a correlative between the fateful morning at The Met a decade previously and his ongoing decision to retain the picture. The loss of the painting is in effect the loss of the 'keystone' that comprises the structural integrity of Theo's life that consists of decisions intended to distract and levee his psyche from the unaddressed traumas of his youth. As an emblem of his trauma, 'The Goldfinch' also acts as a shelter: if Theo has a physical product of his trauma, he has no need to examine the trauma itself because he feels he owns it. Losing the picture causes him to acknowledge and thus relive the pain of losing of his mother and his life as he knew it as a child, though he is not able to verbalise this. The irony, of course, is that he never had 'The Goldfinch' after leaving Las Vegas. The painting was never 'his,' and although he has a strong emotional connection with it, he never attempts to lay eyes on it for the entirety of the time it is hidden in his bedroom at Hobie's house. While he claims that this was a fear-driven decision, particularly as Lucius Reeve suspects he possesses it and stalks him, this reasoning only goes so far as Lucius does not begin to suspect Theo has the painting until years after his return to New York.

The German black market art dealer, Horst, is able to give ekphrastic voice to the painting through his art knowledge and, as a person divorced from Theo's degree of emotional attachment, offers what becomes in the text an almost meta-analysis of the work in relation to the text itself:

True: there are passages worked like a trompe l'œil...the wall and the perch, gleam of light on brass, and then...the feathered breast, most creaturely...he's making a pun on the genre....a masterly riposte to whole idea of trompe l'œil...because in other passages of the work —the head? the wing?—not creaturely or literal in the slightest, he takes the image apart very deliberately... Daubs and patches, very shaped and hand-worked, the neckline

⁷⁰ Edward Bibring, 'The Conception of the Repetition Compulsion,' *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 4 (1943, published online 2017), pp. 486-519 (p. 486) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1943.11925548>>.

especially, a solid piece of paint, very abstract... There's a doubleness. You see the mark, you see the paint for the paint, and also the living bird.⁷¹

Horst argues that Fabritius is not attempting to fool the eye, but is engaging in a discourse on the nature of trompe l'œil itself by revealing how it is done—not at all unlike the text revealing an awareness that Theo cannot which is the 'doubleness' of what the painting is, itself a representation of a goldfinch, and within the context of the novel carefully set up to be a representation of love and loss. Horst drives the point home: '...build up the illusion, the trick—but step closer? it falls apart into brushstrokes. Abstract, unearthly. A different and much deeper sort of beauty altogether. The thing and yet not the thing'.⁷²

The idea of the painting being 'the thing and yet not the thing' also represents how for Theo the picture fully emblematises Audrey's love and security without being or providing either. Horst makes an assessment of the Dutch masters' tendency to make jokes which is redolent of Audrey's discourse on *natures mortes*, the hidden intimations of death in what are often meant to be still-lives. Both refer to hidden messages that can be deciphered only when one takes a closer look. Both see a kind of beauty in the way the messages subvert the initial beauty of the painting: one in providing a stark reminder of the fleeting nature of life, and the other a reminder that, for all the very real feelings and reactions art evokes, it remains a brush-stroked *representation* of reality.

Horst also provides the last significant ekphrastic description of 'The Goldfinch' before Theo holds it again in his hands nearly 100 pages later. "Although I admit, I was surprised—" turning to look at me — "when I held it in my hands the first time? The weight of it?"⁷³ And indeed this 'heft' or 'weight' of the painting, the physical knowledge Theo has of it, is the first way he recognises it in the dark car following a botched handoff. Without unwrapping it, he knows from touch and physical dimension alone that it is not a fake. Although 'The Goldfinch' is famously

⁷¹ Tartt, p. 575.

⁷² Tartt, p. 575-579.

⁷³ Tartt, p. 579.

small, measuring 33.5 by 22.8cm,⁷⁴ Theo's sense of weight and dimension bears a strong resonance with the scholarship and research referenced in the introduction around how trauma memories are stored as physical sensations. As both a 'talisman' of his mother's love and an emblem of his affect, Theo's recall of "The Goldfinch" is physical:

Running my fingertip incredulously around the edges of the board, like Doubting Thomas across the palm of Christ...even after so many years my hands remembered the painting so well that my fingers went to the nail marks immediately, at the bottom of the panel, the tiny holes where (once upon a time, or so it was said) the painting was nailed up as a tavern sign, part of a painted cabinet, no one knew.⁷⁵

The religious reference highlights the almost salvific effect the painting seems to offer Theo, but it is not the artistic content of the painting but its physical composition that identifies the work as authentic to him. Although physical, Theo's need to feel the painting, to know by touch, does harken back to the comfort it gives him, and the calming sensory memories he has of a time before he came to possess it.

The spatial contextual ekphrasis shows a visual impact of the environment on the work. It is in Theo's hands as he sits in the backseat of a moving car on a rainy night. The light of passing street lamps plays across the surface of the painting, and though Theo notices there is a new chip on its upper left edge, it is otherwise perfect and unchanged. For the first time, Theo feels a sense of inadequacy while gazing at the patterns of light passing over it that his own life is a 'patternless and transient burst of energy, a fizz of biological static just as random as the street lamps flashing past'.⁷⁶ The concept of patternless-ness that Theo accesses through his reaction to the art is revisited in the aftermath of the chaotic and violent climax of the novel when Theo has experienced yet another trauma in which Boris is shot and he himself kills a man; he recalls his father's belief that there is always an underlying pattern: '*There's always more to things, a hidden level... There's a pattern and we're part of it.* Yet if you

⁷⁴ Frans-Willem Korsten, 'Republican baroque: a thunderclap, a city hall and two executions', in *A Dutch Republican Baroque: Theatricality, Dramatization, Moment, and Event* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017) pp. 11–40 (p. 23) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxxxk0.4>>.

⁷⁵ Tartt, p. 672.

⁷⁶ Tartt, p. 672.

scratched very deep at that idea of pattern...you hit an emptiness so dark that it destroyed, categorically, anything you'd ever looked or thought of as light'.⁷⁷ Here the novel presents an inversion of Theo's primary trauma that harkens back to every major subsequent trauma he has experienced since: his loved one —Boris— has survived, but he is left alone and bereft of his talisman. Again he is in a state of physical and mental distress, though this time also nearly having overdosed on heroin in an attempt to escape from the mental torment he feels, and again an absent parent's words are represented in italics instead of quotations, intimating that Theo hears his father speaking in the present moment.

Referring to how Fabritius died, one of the last things Theo recalls Audrey saying before the explosion is: "People die, sure. But it's so heartbreaking and unnecessary how we lose *things*. From pure carelessness. Fires, wars. The Parthenon, used as a munitions storehouse. I guess anything we manage to save from history is a miracle".⁷⁸ And while these words do carry truth for Theo, as it is only in the process of losing "The Goldfinch" —the simultaneous act of physically returning the picture and living apart from his traumatic 'talisman' for the first time— that he comes to see the value in being open about his feelings and actions in the form of confessing his love to Pippa and making amends to Hobie for selling his furniture 'changelings' as originals. For most of the novel, he believes possessing the picture is the same as owning it, and he also views possessing it as having a direct line to the mother—a reality he cannot articulate. It is during the moment of confession about the furniture sales that Hobie appears to expound on Audrey's statement about 'things':

Where's the nobility in patching up a bunch of old tables and chairs? Corrosive to the soul, quite possibly...Caring too much for objects can destroy you. Only —if you care for a thing enough, it takes on a life of its own, doesn't it? And isn't the whole point of things—beautiful things—that they connect you to some larger beauty? Those first images that crack your heart wide open and you spend the rest of your life chasing, or trying to recapture, in one way or another?"⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Tartt, p. 695.

⁷⁸ Tartt, p. 28.

⁷⁹ Tartt, p. 757.

Hobie seems to address a latent question the novel asks about ownership and its effect, particularly for Theo: acknowledgement that '[c]aring too much for objects can destroy you,' before indicating that this is also the point at which they take on lives of their own, perhaps *because* they are connected to a 'larger beauty,' or a higher meaning.

First-person testimony is a powerful narrative choice for trauma enactment. It conveys the substantiality and encompassing nature of trauma in an often uncomfortably close way; the closeness of the first person point of view provides the reader with the intimacy and emotion of a first-hand account. However, such a close attachment can also limit the novel's ability to cogitate or verbalise certain aspects of trauma. This can make the application of rhetorical devices such as ekphrasis particularly effective in supporting the reader's understanding of trauma in the novel. Susana Cavallo points out that 'the very nature of trauma engender[s] silences that make testimony simultaneously the most eloquent and the most elliptical of all writing.'⁸⁰ It is noteworthy then that Tartt makes the decision for Theo to be reunited with his mother toward the end of the novel in a dream sequence evocative of *The Goldfinch* where between both characters there is 'motion and stillness, stillness and modulation, and all the charge and magic of a great painting' as they simply regard one another through a framed mirror with a mixture of relief, sadness, and wonder. Theo understands if he turns around (his mother's reflection appears behind him), he will not be able to see her, and must continue looking through the frame in order to look at her, as one would in a painting. Theo's mother takes a breath as though she is about to speak, and at this moment, Theo wakes up (724). This suspended moment with Audrey recalls the original moment when Theo regains consciousness in the museum and recognises that there are 'visible' and 'invisible' parts of his mother and both are necessary, acting as a parallel to the theory of denotative and connotative ekphrasis.

Even though no art is presented in this moment, Tartt's intentional use of likening the moment to observing a painting presents Audrey as an art object.

⁸⁰ Susana Cavallo, 'Witness: The Real, the Unspeakable, and the Construction of Narrative', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 33/34 (2000), pp. 1-3, (p. 1) <www.jstor.org/stable/1315336> Accessed 8 May 2023.

Although definition has evolved considerably and in contemporary times has been applied to the relationship between visual media and language, it is worth noting that in its original use, ekphrasis was not limited to art objects alone, and instead referred to describing anything from art to a scene to a person.⁸¹ In this sense, and given the spatial-context of the painting relative to Theo and its inextricable connection to his mother, Tartt presents ekphrasis in a heuristic, classical sense in which affect (this time more positive than negative or fraught) is both vivid and clear, and a breath away from prosopopoeia.⁸² In Audrey's silence, affect is suspended, and given space for resonance.

Rather than unspeakable, Theo's affect in releasing what was both a talisman of his mother's love as well as a relic of his trauma, is expressed fully through this classical use of ekphrasis. Theo's first-person testimony of his experiences of trauma and affect does not divert from their closeness to him, but ekphrasis provides an opportunity to consider the full force of Theo's trauma through ekphrastic descriptions of *The Goldfinch* in context, effectually positioning it to represent his mother and his trauma and enabling one of the final moments of the novel to invoke a reflection which 'mirrors' his attachment to the painting, which he is soon after able to relinquish, physically and emotionally, in a clear and major step toward recovery.

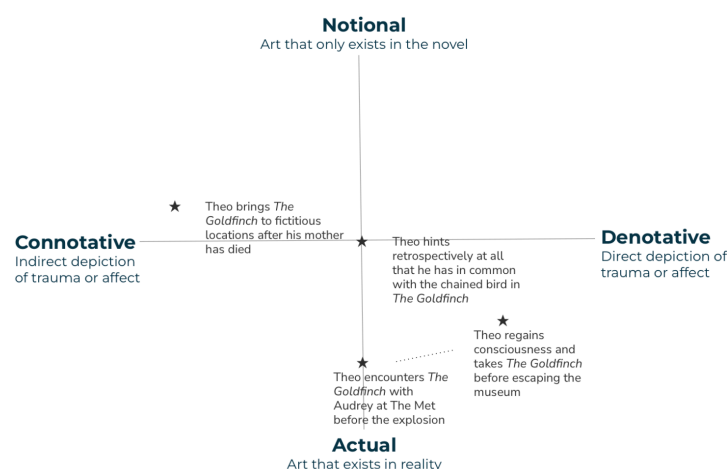
The narrative decisions Tartt makes with regard to Theo's treatment of the painting rely on ekphrasis, particularly spatial contextual ekphrasis, not only to convey the association between the painting and Theo's mother, but also the affect he experiences as a result of his trauma. As the painting is introduced by his mother on the day of the terror attack and comes into his possession in the aftermath, it is imbued with an association to his mother and a direct line to the trauma of losing her. As *The Goldfinch* goes where Theo goes, it is always directly in the same environment

⁸¹ Christopher M Chinn, 'Before Your Very Eyes: Pliny *Epistulae* 5.6 and the Ancient Theory of Ekphrasis', *Classical Philology*, 102 (2007), pp. 245–331 (p. 265).

⁸² There are many notable examples of this effect in trauma-related literature. In Dan Pagis's "Written In Pencil in the Sealed Freightcar," one of the most well-known and formative poems about the Holocaust, Pagis, himself a survivor, ends the work with Eve's incomplete message to her son with the words 'tell him that i', foisting responsibility upon the reader to parse meaning — what it was she intended to say — effectively empowering her to say everything without saying anything. See: Susan Gubar, 'The Long and the Short of Holocaust Verse', *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), pp. 443-486 (p. 446) <www.jstor.org/stable/20057848> [Accessed 8 May 2023].

as his subsequent traumatic experiences and its subject matter comes to represent a major component of Theo's trauma affect, namely, a sense of being tethered to hopelessness. His choice to disregard details that evoke pain or a sense of hopelessness represent both his reverence for the memory of his mother and his own refusal or inability to confront his trauma directly. The spatial contextual ekphrasis used to describe where the picture is always reflects Theo's current situation and mental state: from the barren southwest American landscape that stands in for his lost way of life to its location under Theo's bed next to the pills he has come to rely upon to function, to the dark car on the grim night that his risk-taking to regain possession of the painting turns deadly and in fact re-traumatizing. The use of spatial contextual ekphrasis has a prosopopoeial effect that enables the text to speak for and more directly represent traumatic affect without violating the representation of the experience of a trauma survivor who, over time, comes to recognise how his own affect impacts his experience of the art.

Below is a directional mapping of ekphrastic moments discussed in this chapter to demonstrate the necessity of spectrum thinking in ekphrasis as a rhetorical device in which to explore affect. Theo's primary trauma shifts how the painting's appearance and location evolve initially, and the trauma affect he suffers in the context of his lived experience and grief is revealed in the profound shifts in his perception, treatment, and experience of "The Goldfinch" throughout the novel.



Chapter 2

'Seeing is flux': Mapping Traumatic Affect Through Connotative and Denotative Ekphrasis in *What I Loved*

We have seen the importance spatial-contextual ekphrasis can have in exploring and representing trauma affect. In Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, there are numerous ekphrastic descriptions of artworks, a few of which are actual works, whilst the majority are notional, or invented. Examining the differences in ekphrasis within this novel is an opportunity to explore the ways ekphrasis of notional and actual works can differ in the contemplation and representation of trauma affect.

As novels with ekphrasis go, Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* is loaded with ekphrastic description. Although not every instance of ekphrasis in this work is connected with trauma affect (nor is it necessary that all instances do) a novel that does present a number of ekphrastic descriptions related to trauma affect also presents an opportunity for further exploration of the aspects of critical nuance presented in the introduction of this thesis, and to test the framework.

As explained in the introductory chapter of this thesis, trauma, in the sense of its affect, is an inherently complicated experience that stems from events that confound the ability to cope, but not to communicate. In his introduction to *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst points out that there is diametric opposition between doyens of literary trauma theory such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman who contend that trauma is inherently aporial because it can only be understood retrospectively, and a wealth of therapeutic evidence that in fact, narrativising or communicating a traumatic experience and its affect are effective in recovery.⁸³

However, the difficulty of coping with trauma can strengthen the temptation to make sense of trauma by *realigning* events with what is acceptable, rational, or fully comprehensible.⁸⁴ It is in this direction that ekphrasis, a device which by its open nature attempts to attend to the space between the visual and the verbal, can be

⁸³ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008) pp. 5-6.

⁸⁴ Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) pp. 101-118.

particularly illuminating:⁸⁵ writing a trauma narrative can be an exploration of a similar delta between a fracturing event and an art form that, even if fractured in kind, is experienced one word after another.

As a pole on a proposed spectrum of actual to notional ekphrasis, notional ekphrasis can pose an interesting conundrum of narrative convenience, in which exposition can disallow the complexity of trauma affect. Similar to Luckhurst's interpretation of Derrida's aporia as a type of 'violence' in which deploying narrative as a means of finding certainty and meaning in response to trauma is simply a way to avoid facing the fractured, chaotic reality of trauma affect.⁸⁶

By definition, notional ekphrasis enables the author to invent an imagined artistic representation that fits within the context of the novel. Although in a trauma affect context, this may ameliorate the risk of romanticising unspeakability, it can swing too far in the opposite direction and amplify the risk of making the ekphrasis too informative or instructive in its rendering. If the ekphrasis fits too cleanly, there is a risk of oversimplifying or invalidating the inherent complexity of trauma through what essentially becomes a heavy-handed metaphor. Restraint is therefore essential when exploring these aspects through a type of ekphrasis that is, at least at surface level, invented for the convenience of the novel. I am not suggesting that notional ekphrasis is inherently over-engineered; simply that the risk can be higher, and the result can be to aestheticise or oversimplify trauma affect.

With few exceptions, Hustvedt is careful to always first show an ekphrastic baseline in *What I Loved*. This limits the risk, at least initially, that the narrative will be too instructive in relation to ekphrasis and affect. It also is in keeping with Leo's perspective as a narrator and protagonist who is a long-time art critic and art history professor and therefore an expert in ekphrasis. Although as Heffernan points out, it's impossible to be truly agnostic in any artistic description, most of the time, Leo's tendency is to try. As a result, the critical baseline in *What I Loved* is really about 'seeing' or experiencing the art initially without receiving much explicit or implicit

⁸⁵ Gary Shapiro, 'The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the "Infinite Relation" of Translation', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 6 (2007), pp. 13-24 (p. 14) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907075065>>.

⁸⁶ Luckhurst, p. 5-6.

indicators from the novel in terms of how Leo himself interprets or understand the art, except inasmuch as where to “look” — that is, the details and the order in which they are described — are explicit directions. Generally, when a new work of art is introduced, the initial ekphrastic description refrains from drawing overt correlatives with any specific events from the storyline until this baseline is established.

Although in the present-tense frame of the novel, Leo is visually impaired to the degree that he can no longer physically see the works he references when recounting a period in his life that began and ended decades prior, his lifelong and vocational commitment to the study and criticism of art enable him to recall these works in extraordinary detail, and to return to these details as his story unfolds.

Luckhurst, Pederson, and other contemporary trauma theorists argue that a key way to navigate the risk of creating too convenient a narrative is to fracture it. This can better mirror the known and well-established aspects of the fracturing or shattering nature of trauma, and is most commonly presented in terms of nonlinearity. Although not strictly a nonlinear novel, the narrative of *What I Loved* becomes fractured roughly one-third of the way through upon Matt’s death. Before this critical point, Leo’s lived experiences and friendships are not uncomplicated or uniformly easy, but as an adult his life in New York is characterised by a fair degree of privilege and self philosophising. After, this search for meaning and understanding turns from an academic endeavour into a far more personal, affective experience of psychological overwhelm. As a well-established reaction to trauma is to attempt to make sense of it, this would fall under the realm of affect. Hustvedt’s choice to frame the novel in the present tense and within that frame to present an internal, linear telling is separated from Leo’s primary trauma by decades. Leo is able to explore the more complicating elements of affect that only become apparent to him in a retrospective examination of Bill’s art as well as actual works. As Leo tells his story, returning to Bill’s work over time establishes the connection between ekphrasis and affect. Hustvedt offers a defense of this authorial decision through Leo at the end of the novel:

Every story we tell about ourselves can only be told in the past tense. It winds backwards from where we now stand, no longer actors in the story but its spectators who have chosen to speak... The story flies over the blanks, filling

them in with the hypotaxis of an “and” or an “and then.” I’ve done it in these pages to stay on a path I knew is interrupted by shallow pits and several deep holes. Writing is a way to trace my hunger, and hunger is nothing if not a void.⁸⁷

From the outset, the text draws a direct correlative between ekphrasis and Leo and Bill’s personal lives, beginning with Bill’s art. “‘Seeing is flux’”, Bill tells Leo at the beginning of their friendship, likening stories to blood traversing a body when Leo mentions he perceives hidden narratives within Bill’s work. ‘As an artist, Bill was hunting the unseen in the seen. The paradox was that he had chosen to present this invisible moment in figureative painting, which is nothing if not a frozen apparition — a surface’.⁸⁸ This early exchange similarly positions Leo to hunt for the unseen within Bill’s work, and to reveal these invisible moments through connotative ekphrasis.

The first instance of Leo perception of ‘the unseen’ in the text is straightforward. Though Bill’s relationship with his father, Sy, is estranged, Leo observes how stunned and moved Bill is to learn that Sy quietly returned to the gallery where Bill’s first art installation is housed simply to re-examine the art privately. In the wake of Sy’s sudden death, and against the backdrop of his own disintegrating marriage, Bill obsessively sketches hundreds of versions of the same portrait of his father as a figure with his back turned, walking away. When these later appear in Bill’s multimedia ‘Missing Men’ installation as detailed paintings, Leo is reminded of the hyper-real detail of the Dutch Golden Age, down specks of dust on the figure’s shoulder — but ‘without their illusion of depth’.⁸⁹ Instead, in each consecutive panel, the figure in the paintings appears slightly older, but this is largely obfuscated by personal objects (thank-you cards, ticket stubs, personal letters, condoms, aspirin, bills, etc.) that frame and partially over-layer the paintings. Although Leo’s initial ekphrastic description of the works is largely denotative, he quickly interprets its connotation based on what he knows of Bill and Sy’s relationship:

⁸⁷ Hustvedt, p. 364.

⁸⁸ Hustvedt, p. 13.

⁸⁹ Hustvedt, pp. 35-46.

Over each canvas, Bill placed a thick piece of Plexiglas, which removed the viewer from the two layers underneath. The Plexiglas turned the work into memorials. Without it, the objects and papers would have been accessible, but sealed behind that transparent wall, the image of the man and the detritus of his life could not be reached.⁹⁰

Leo has intimate knowledge of Bill as a person and therefore defensible insight into what Bill's art directly depicts. As a result, the primary meaning or emotional thrust of Bill's work is apparent to Leo where it may not be to an outsider. What initially suggests the departure of a loved one, the 'detritus' small but intimate reminders of a larger whole, a greater loss, instead becomes a story of absence and abandonment. The Plexiglas, rather than protecting each vignette, turns them into memorials, and renders permanent a sense of closeness that is palpably attainable, but never attained. The role of intimacy in Leo's friendship with Bill informs his empathetic understanding of Bill's art, which Leo knows from the beginning is characterised by subversion. Bill separates the viewer from his father physically, but also grants the immediacy and reality of his own experience of his relationship with Sy: present but purposefully inaccessible and therefore in effect, 'missing'.

Relatedly, Leo's early childhood experiences with traumatic loss and absence shape his sense of identity. Although he and his parents successfully fled Nazi Germany when he was five years old, many close members of his family who stayed behind were murdered at Auschwitz, and Leo has vivid memories of his father scanning newspapers in New York as he tried to learn their fates. '...I have always felt their unmarked graves became a part of me. What was unwritten then is inscribed into what I call myself. The longer I live the more convinced I am that when I say "I," I am really saying "we"'.⁹¹ Leo's sense of fused identities, which he suggests as stemming from traumatic loss, returns in the course of his relationship with Bill.

The introduction of 'The Changeling' before Matt and Bill's deaths is significant. In encountering the painting prior to the primary trauma of losing his son, and then later caring for Mark as a surrogate, Leo is able to examine it more closely through the lens of Bill's friend rather than that of a grieving parent. The difference in

⁹⁰ Hustvedt, p. 46.

⁹¹ Hustvedt, p. 23.

connotation underscores his drastic shift in perspective. In two pages of ekphrasis dedicated to describing the rooms, Leo includes just one personal inference, a fleeting observation that the boy is the same age as Matt and Mark were at the time, and has no affective reaction to the scene with the child in the glass coffin:

...the woman had become a sculpture with the same primitive face painted on her oval head. She stood over the boy and looked down at him where he slept inside a glass box, still gripping his needle and thread. Beside her stood another boy with his eyes shut—a figure who was identical in every way to the child who was lying in the transparent coffin.⁹²

Although Leo quickly recognises that what initially appears to be a box is a coffin, the ekphrasis lacks descriptive detail and instead focuses on the identical fourth and sixth elements, the only sections that are not three-dimensional rooms but paintings, in which the paper woman takes on dimension:

The canvas showed the woman carrying the boy through a Manhattan street, which looked to be somewhere in the Diamond District... She no longer looked like a paper doll but appeared to be in three dimensions, like the child she carried. Her back was bent and her knees buckled as she stepped forward with him in her arms. Only the woman's face remained the same—two dots for eyes, a vertical line for a nose, and another horizontal slash for the mouth.⁹³

Leo recognises it is a deeply personal, internal piece for Bill, in part due to its multilayered physical structure, but fixates on the identical pieces of the woman stealing a child away. He ventures a connection between the woman and Violet by observing she wears the same shoes as the paper woman in another piece. Bill admits that they were originally Lucille's shoes, a detail he claims was unintentional, before rushing through an explanation of doubling myths across cultures and history, and then changing the subject back to Lucille. Depicting her face in the art as a child's drawing aligns with other claims Bill makes about her immaturity and desire to have custody of Mark only if Bill insists that he be his primary carer, despite the fact that she appears incapable of providing Mark with a physically or psychologically safe environment.

⁹² Hustvedt, p. 115.

⁹³ Hustvedt, p. 115.

Later, though, Leo recalls the room with the coffin and comes to realise that the work was always about Bill's own sense of loss in relation to Mark and his inability to connect with him. Mark's closeness to Matt's death, proclivity to lie, and knowledge of Me's murder, are taken as too much evidence to contradict that, similar to Lucille, he appears ultimately to be incapable of experiencing empathy and mirrors the affect he sees in others. 'Bill knew, I thought. Somewhere inside him, he knew'.⁹⁴ Bill's work in this instance, then, becomes for Leo a representation of what Bill suspected about his son. When Violet informs Leo that she had to rewind the answering machine, indicating Bill had listened to the anonymous message about the murder hours before his death, seals the shift in Leo's mind about 'The Changeling' as not denotative purely of Bill's struggles with Lucille's abuse of their son, but Bill's own awareness of Mark's emotional disconnect.

Bill's 'Icarus', the unfinished video supercuts of children playing and interacting in a variety of settings is presented posthumously, and Leo notes that although the children have 'startling' differences in terms of appearance and facets of identity, their faces appear to intermingle and they share a common 'furious animation of children' in that they are constantly active: 'A simple walk down the block included waving, hopping, skipping, twirling, and multiple pauses to examine a piece of litter, pet a dog, or jump up and walk along a cement barrier or low fence'.⁹⁵ Although Leo recognises that the edit was a work in progress and still unrefined, he sees Bill's intention to coalesce these images into an impression of a single entity in what Leo perceives as the work's dual 'particularity and sameness' that it reveals in children.⁹⁶ Unlike the first denotative ekphrastic description of 'The Changeling', which literally depicts a dead child replaced by a living imposter, it is in these semi-edited tapes of living children that, sans parable or over-intellectualising, Leo is reminded of Matt, '... first as a baby, then as a toddler, and finally as a boy who had been left in childhood forever'.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Hustvedt, p. 342.

⁹⁵ Hustvedt, p. 336.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 336-337.

⁹⁷ Hustvedt, p. 337.

Leo's primary expression of affect in the aftermath of Matt's death is characterised by denial: he grapples with feelings of unreality and a profound fear of the destructive force of his grief, so he sits still when he feels chaotic and unsteady. For months he suffers a conflicting simultaneity of an inability and an unwillingness to permit his grief to be fully expressed, which includes restraint in any outward expression of grief, as well as conscious abstinence from touching Matt's belongings — in particular, his drawings. When he does finally have to touch it at Erica's request to both file away and send to her in Berkeley, he finds himself tracing the lines of the works with his finger: 'I found the motion of his living hand that way, and once I had started it, I couldn't stop'.⁹⁸

As explored previously, certain diagnostic standards for psychological trauma as a diagnosis, particularly those in the DSM, have been criticised for a number of reasons, including a failure to acknowledge degrees of severity in grief and what can appear to be arbitrary restrictions around time —when symptom onset occurs, and for how long. This can overlook the impact a fracturing event can impose on a typical reaction timeframe as well as the interrelatedness between traumatic loss and grief. It also overlooks a strong historical awareness of the inconsistent ways trauma can present. Gregory Bistoën, Stijn Vanheule, and Stef Craps explain that the Freudian concept of a delayed trauma reaction known as *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning 'deferral', (though often translated as 'afterwardness'), which characterises later-onset trauma responses to a range of triggers that include some the DSM-V would consider to be clinically minor or even insignificant (e.g. life changes, non-major stressors), 'demonstrates that the subjective impact of an event is not given once and for all but is malleable by subsequent experiences', therefore undermining stricter diagnostic criteria of the DSM-V and creating more space to acknowledge that trauma affect, similar to disability, is not necessarily a static condition.⁹⁹ It is also noteworthy that well after this article was published, a text revision of the DSM-V was released in

⁹⁸ Hustvedt, p. 147.

⁹⁹ Gregory Bistoën, Stijn Vanheule, and Stef Craps, 'Nachträglichkeit: A Freudian Perspective on Delayed Traumatic Reactions,' *Theoretical Psychology*, 24 (2014), pp. 668–87 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0959354314530812>>

2022 (DSM-V-TR), which newly categorises ‘Prolonged Grief Disorder’ under the trauma family of disorders, though its conditions still involve time-bound, consistent presentation of symptoms. As a concept, *Nachträglichkeit* is useful in understanding Leo’s affect as it presents immediately after he begins retracing Matt’s drawings: it is a delayed reaction that stems from his grief, and it is the intentional act of tracing and retracing an intentional creation made by his son.

In addition to spatial-contextual ekphrasis, Hans Lund proposes a way of conceptualising non-physical, relationship-focused ekphrasis as ‘temporal contextual ekphrasis’, or the interplay between memory, personal connection, and the description of art.¹⁰⁰ Both contextual ekphrastic descriptions are present as a result of this moment: Leo is in his son’s bedroom and he is both expressing and coming into contact with his grief through his physical and temporal interactions with it.

The intentional description of his son’s ‘living hand’ immediately invokes John Keats’s brief and evocative poem, ‘This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable’. Though the work is not ekphrastic in the contemporary use of the term, Hustvedt’s reference to Keats in particular through the words ‘living hand’ is telling given the poem’s subject matter of offering intimacy and connection between author and reader, as well as the immediacy, through the use of contextual ekphrasis and the present-progressive tense of ‘living’ and the offer of ‘this’ hand (rather than “a” hand) to the reader.¹⁰¹ The evocation of haunting the reader day and night in ‘This living hand, now warm and capable’ and final offer ‘...here it is—I hold it toward you’¹⁰², are mirrored in Leo’s affective desire to connect with his son’s living hand through touching and tracing his drawings.

Shortly after beginning this ritual, Leo is overwhelmed by his grief in the middle of an ekphrastic description whilst teaching a graduate seminar on still life. One of the students opens the classroom windows, flooding the space with light and

¹⁰⁰ *Pictures into Words*, pp. 178.

¹⁰¹ Brooke Hopkins, ‘Keats and the Uncanny: “This Living Hand”’, *The Kenyon Review*, 11 (1989), p. 34.

¹⁰² John Keats, ‘This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable’, in *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50375/this-living-hand-now-warm-and-capable>> [accessed online 7 November 2018].

warm spring air, intimating life and renewal — details which prove contextually important to Leo's lecture on Chardin's *Glass of Water and a Coffee Pot*. Though he begins with baseline ekphrasis: "...how simple the painting was, two objects, three heads of garlic, and the sprig of an herb. I mentioned the light on the pot's rim and handle, the whiteness of the garlic, and the silver hues of the water", the rendering of the water itself becomes a trigger expressed through Leo's combined denotative and connotative ekphrastic descriptions:

And then I found myself staring down at the glass of water in the picture. I moved very close to it. The strokes were visible. I could see them plainly. A precise quiver of the brush had made light. I swallowed, breathed heavily, and choked... "The water," I said in a low voice. "The glass of water is very moving to me." I looked up and saw the surprised faces of my students. "The water is a sign of..." I paused. "The water seems to be a sign of absence".¹⁰³

Ultimately it is the ekphrastic combination of not merely looking at Matt's art but touching it in search of his 'living hand' and then making connotative meaning in his close ekphrastic examination of Chardin's work that finally give rise to the expression and release of a physical affect of grief that Leo knows he has been holding. Furthermore, the connection point Leo makes afterward seems not to be the content of Matt's art, but the glass of water Leo used to bring him every night. 'A real glass of water had not reminded me of my son, but the image of a glass of water rendered 230 years earlier had catapulted me suddenly and irrevocably into the painful awareness that I was still alive'.¹⁰⁴

Leo is able to dissociate from affect enough to dismiss his class so he can be afforded as close as possible to a private moment to grieve: '...I tried not to make any noise, but I know that I did. I gulped for air and I gagged and deep ugly sounds came from my throat as I sobbed for what seemed like a very long time'.¹⁰⁵ Leo's long inability to cry is broken by his newfound openness to touching his son's artwork, by allowing him to remember and be reminded fully of Matt's absence in his perception of a living hand of someone else's art, and his recollection of trying not to make noise

¹⁰³ Hustvedt, p. 146.

¹⁰⁴ Hustvedt, p. 148.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 147.

whilst knowing that his crying is both audible and ‘ugly’, indicates both a desire for privacy in his mourning — he is certainly aware that he is not in a protected space — and a real-time judgement placed on the aesthetics of his own affect. Leo is more capable of drawing clear connections between his experiences of art and his affective reactions to it than attempting to examine affect alone.

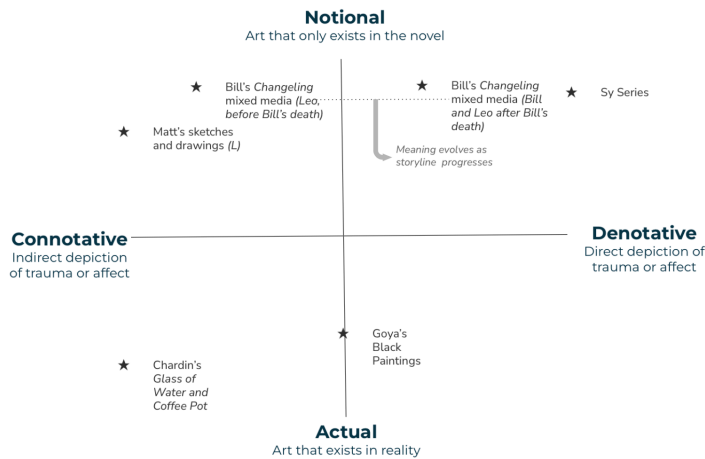
Hustvedt creates a fracture of a kind in Leo’s relationship to art in which it is both an avenue to explore and demonstrate affect, and an attempt to escape or distance himself from it. When Leo studies Goya’s black paintings, he states directly that this is connected with his erotic fantasies of Violet which are in themselves a dissociative distraction. An ekphrastic description of a witches’ Sabbath in which a young, nude woman rides a goat springboards this initial fantasy: ‘His beast runs, but his rider is out of control. Her head has fallen back. Her hair streams out behind her and her legs may not cling much longer to the animal’s body. I touched the woman’s shaded thigh and pale knee, and the gesture sent me to Paris’.¹⁰⁶ However, it is also around this time that he begins to have recurring dreams that Matt is alive again, dreams that are so realistic that in sleep he is returned an ‘unshakeable, joyous certainty’ that his son is returned.¹⁰⁷ By connecting these separate and conflicting imaginings with Goya’s black paintings, Hustvedt does demonstrate ‘fracture’ through Leo’s attempts to distract himself from his pain as well as his desperate desire for the impossible restoration of what his life had been before Matt dies.

For Leo, this particular act of taking in art and applying it to reverie is intended as an avenue to avoidance, rather than a confrontation of his own trauma. However, it is not a simplification of trauma affect. Leo seeks refuge not in sexual fantasies alone, but in representations of pain, hellish figures, and emotional overwhelm, suggesting even in an escapist ritual, he is not able to truly distance himself from his own grief.

Ultimately, although convenient, ekphrasis of notional and real works of art are used in tandem to explore affect in a way that is consistent with Leo’s character. He is capable of communicating and representing his trauma, but it is only through art that he is able to successfully explore it.

¹⁰⁶ Hustvedt, p. 167.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 167.



If we refer to the ekphrasis framework from the introduction, we can see how Hustvedt explores trauma affect through numerous instances of ekphrasis that span across real and imagined works as well as works that depict affect directly or

indirectly. Some of which, similar to the presentation of Fabritius's painting in *The Goldfinch*, shift in their ekphrastic description over time to match the evolution of Theo's affect and how it presents. The above graph indicates where that ekphrasis is presented in the novel in terms of whether it is notional (e.g. Chardin's work) or actual (e.g. Bill's work), and whether the art as it is described directly represents affect in either a literal or highly inferential, initially inexplicit way.

Chapter 3: ‘Which comes first... what we see, or how we see?’ Witnessing and ways of seeing in Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*

Ali Smith complicates affect and ekphrasis considerably through a narrative that is not only fractured but polychronological in connecting two seemingly unrelated stories of traumatic loss and grief in *How to be Both*. Every instance of ekphrasis deployed in the novel functions as a touchstone into the memory of a critical inflection point in George or Franchesco’s lives, and to achieve an ekphrastic symbolism that extends beyond the artwork, the narrative establishes simultaneity and narrative in the form of the actual present-tense frame of their stories — George’s mourning rituals and Franchesco’s consciousness as a ghost tethered to her — as well as the memory of their previous lives which alternated between the present and past tense (George before her mother’s death and Franchesco before being a ghost).

On her decision to present the novel in two ways, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Smith explained that she was interested in exploring simultaneity in the novel and was inspired by an illustration of a fresco which revealed that underneath the top layer which portrayed a woman, there was an ‘underdrawing’ of a boy underneath which had been painted over. She said ‘It struck me as a great metaphor for how narrative works...Every great narrative is at least two narratives, if not more —the thing that is on the surface and then the things underneath which are invisible.’¹⁰⁸

Pathetic fallacy, not only in terms of landscape and setting within the novel but in terms of the context in which ekphrasis is encountered, can of course be in itself an enactment of trauma affect. Carol dies around the time that water damage appears in the ceiling of George’s bedroom.¹⁰⁹ As time goes on the water stain becomes a prominent component of the setting of George’s room. Instead of telling her father

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Lyall, ‘An Onion of a Novel, Demanding to be Peeled’, *New York Times*, 25 November 2014 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/26/books/ali-smith-on-her-new-book-how-to-be-both.html>> [accessed 8 May 2023].

¹⁰⁹ Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015). Both original editions, one in which George’s section is first in and one in which Francesco’s section is first, were published simultaneously in 2014 by The Bodley Head, an imprint of Random House. The cited edition presents George’s section first.

about the leak, she allows the water stain to spread in the hope that it will result in a hole in her ceiling through which she can see the sky, reflecting her struggle to cope with her mother's passing, and a more classical sense of ekphrasis as bringing a vividness and clarity to affect rather than simply to a work of art.

It is clear that the art George creates within the context of the damaged walls of her bedroom, known only to her, represents the degree to which George has retreated from interaction with others, as well as the paranoid ideation she indulges with regard to surveillance (such as believing Lisa was stalking Carol, believing Carol was under government surveillance, et cetera). The intimacy of George's damaged room is therefore a significant pathetic fallacy and setting for Francesco's ekphrastic description of George's art as it places into context the internal nature of George's difficult attempts to cope with her mother's death.

George and Francesco's respective sections of the novel are each entitled 'One', implying that both are happening at once in simultaneity and in juxtaposition, which the narrative further emphasises through beginning both perspectives with a reference to witnessing and observation. For George, it is the image of a security camera at the beginning of her section, and for Francesco, the image of a pair of eyes on a stem, evocative of female reproductive organs, and similar to those held by St Lucy in del Cossa's painting of her. The security camera, as an implementation for surveillance, immediately positions George as a subject of observation for del Cossa, and intimates her obsessive observation of Lisa, who in George's mind, is another connection to her mother, whereas the eyes with their reference to gender positions George as a viewer of Francesco's art and determined student of her mother's teachings of subversion and seeing the unseen.

However, only some readers will have foreknowledge of George's mourning ritual when Francesco's character is introduced. Smith creates literal simultaneity and complicates the use of ekphrasis not only through the dual structure of the novel, but choice to publish two versions of it. In one version, the narrative is straightforward and begins with George: she suffers the sudden and traumatic loss of her mother, and her grieving ritual appears to unintentionally cause the spirit of del Cossa to become attached to her, enabling the reader to understand her pain, as well

as del Cossa's through his eyes. In the other version, Franchesco's confused perspective is presented first, as the ghost unwillingly follows George, somehow tethered to her, until George's grief becomes clearer and causes Franchesco to make personal connections, including losing a parent.

Germain Bazin, former curator of The Louvre, refers to the experience of visually engaging with art as 'a sort of trance uniting spectator and masterpiece,' and that the museum itself offers visitors an escape from time, particularly the present.¹¹⁰ Indeed, George's complex mourning rituals centred around the memory of her mother include a regular and almost trancelike examination of del Cossa's portrait of St. Vincent of Ferrar at the National Gallery in London.

The spatial contextual ekphrasis in this instance is tied directly to George's need for ritual as part of her mourning process, and as is the case with many rituals, it calls for effort and intentionality. For example, although George regularly uses a laptop and can easily access photographs of del Cossa's work without leaving home, she instead must experience the original work in person. The effort and intentionality behind this ritual, which is embedded into her other ritualised habits centred around performing and expressing her grief: wearing black, dancing the twist every morning, paying admission to the National Gallery with proceeds from Carol's Subverts, watching the same video depicting the rape of a young girl in an effort to bear witness and acknowledge her pain, are important to George's expression of grief and her desire to be as close as possible to anything that mattered to her mother (22-7).

Principally, George's memories of her mother often centre around moments in which Carol makes details that appear pedestrian or insignificant extraordinary, often frustrating her daughter's attempts to be passive aggressive or jaded. George recalls a time when she asks why Carol saves her pencil shavings in a jar, and, after making a joke about what the 'point' is, Carol confesses that it seems sad to her to throw them away before she has completed her project—a habit George refers to as 'pathetic'. Instead of taking the bait, Carol admits that it is pathetic, 'Literally. I think it's cause they're a proof of something. Hmm. But a proof of what?' In a single exchange, Carol demonstrates the root of George's obsession with words and wordplay, and also a

¹¹⁰ Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York City: Universe Books, 1967) p. 6.

level of vulnerability and openness to questioning that comes to define George's memories of her. Even in casual exchanges, Carol challenges her daughter to look closer.

For George, the contents of the portrait of St Vincent and the way it is rendered are of course less important than the act of visiting the picture as her mother admired del Cossa's work. The spatial-contextual ekphrasis when George first sees the portrait of St Vincent juxtapose the piece with what George perceives as superior works hung near it:

...The painting is in a room of other pictures by painters from around the same time. At first all these pictures by the other people look more interesting than this one, which just looks like another religious picture (first reason not to look) or a rather severe-faced monk (second reason not to look)...¹¹¹

Yet, as George is inspired to examine the picture more closely, as her mother taught her to do, she begins to see syntax and semantics within the work, expressed across pages of denotative ekphrasis. This begins with noticing the figure is not looking at the viewer, but above the viewer, 'like there's something happening beyond you and he can see what it is',¹¹² and culminates in a new understanding of the painting as a pastiche of religious iconography and theatre: Jesus has the face of an elderly man, the saint is standing on what appears to be a stage, and the folds of his cloak also mimic those of a curtain.¹¹³ The subversive nature of the picture becomes clearer, forging another connection to Carol, this time insinuating the 'Subverts' project (as opposed to adverts) that she helped found as a form of feminist online protest against their subliminal or contradictory messages.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Smith p. 154.

¹¹² Smith p. 155.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 157.

¹¹⁴ Possibly a reference to the Guerilla Girls, a feminist movement that began through anonymous protests of the under-representation of women artists in museums and schools of art, in addition to the sexualisation of the female body in art. Their protests which included displaying subversive signs and posters at these establishments. See: Kirsten Leng, 'Art, Humor, and Activism: The Sardonic, Sustaining Feminism of the Guerrilla Girls, 1985–2000', *Journal of Women's History*, 32 (2020), pp. 110–134 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2020.0042>>.

Though George engages in ‘a bit of looking to get past her own surface reaction,’¹¹⁵ in order to honour her mother through her grieving ritual, the result is more akin to Bazin’s description of intimacy between art and the viewer, as it is not her mother’s ghost that returns, nor does George achieve a particular unity with the work (at least, not with its content). Instead, the spirit of del Cossa is summoned back into consciousness, apparently as a result of George’s ritual in the version of the novel that begins with George.

In response to Bazin’s claim about forging a connection between art and the viewer, Stephen Cheeke suggests the same can be true for ekphrasis:

The powerful prose description that seeks to reproduce this kind of experience in a reader might be represented as working then as a form of incantation or evocatory architecture that replaces or stands in for the subjective experience of the gallery visitor, instructing that visitor in the correct aesthetic response while mystifying the art object itself.’¹¹⁶

Smith achieves exactly this through George’s ritual. The enactment and expression of her grief becomes a touchstone for del Cossa to return to consciousness and access memories in a milieu that in many ways reflects the traumatic aspects of Franchesco’s experience of injustice and gender bias in the art world. This is demonstrated through a lack of broader representation of Franchesco’s work and its presence in a room full of the work of cis-gendered men, including that of Cosmo, whose displayed works outnumber Franchesco’s four to one and through Franchesco’s eyes first through the observation of the artist’s own work and then through the spatial context of its placement within the gallery.

This causes the ekphrasis around the painting of ‘St. Vincent of Ferrar’ to carry significantly different weight and meaning in each narrative. For George, memories of viewing del Cossa’s frescoes in Ferrara accentuate the sense of loss of her mother’s wisdom and kindness. The ekphrasis, presented in the spatial context of The National Gallery, help George access other memories of viewing art with her mother, and how

¹¹⁵ Smith p. 130.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 171.

these memories in retrospect come to represent both how much and how little she knew her mother. The effect of the art is so powerful that the memories George accesses are recounted in the present tense: 'Things happen right at the front of pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind that, and behind that, and behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles'.¹¹⁷

George also recalls how her mother theorises during their trip to Ferrara, that based on symbols of the feminine hidden throughout del Cossa's frescos, the artist may have been a woman, perhaps only presenting as a man to have the freedom to study painting which would otherwise have been denied her on the basis of her gender and her family's relatively low social status, but that the likelihood of this being true is slim. In George's narrative that follows, it has been conjectured that this could signal that George, possibly with H, invents Franchesco's narrative for the school project they discuss undertaking.¹¹⁸ This conjecture bears interrogation as it could drastically shift the implications of ekphrasis relative to affect in the novel. There are suggestions in the text that this is possible, including the accurate prediction that if del Cossa were to visit modernity, his first word would be 'Ho' to strikingly contemporary phrases in Franchesco's first-person narrative, such as 'just saying', 'uh-huh,' and 'cause', in addition to only the occasional use of Italian, a language George does not speak, and which Franchesco uses almost exclusively in the context of art terminology. On the whole, however, there are extreme differences between Franchesco's first-person voice and the third-person narrative attached to George in structure, syntax, and tenor, that suggest a considerable gap in both maturity as well as knowledge of 15th Century painting techniques that would be difficult for George to bridge in a short amount of time. Finally, in the version of the novel that begins with Franchesco's story, the artist observes George and H together,

¹¹⁷ Smith, p. 47.

¹¹⁸ Holly Ranger, 'Ali Smith and Ovid', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 26 (2019), pp. 397-416 < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48698739> > [accessed 8 May 2023]. Ranger observes that Smith engages in intertextual discourse with Ovid, contending that Smith's ekphrasis is not only characteristic of Ovid but self-reflexive. This element of self-reflexivity could extend to include another obfuscated meta-narrative within the novel in the form of Franchesco's perspective actually written by George.

suggesting that the ghost is already present by the time the idea of what Franchesco would make of modernity is raised. Instead, Smith remains consistent in fractured narratives that neither instruct nor make conjectures in making sense of trauma affect.¹¹⁹

George and Franchesco do, however, have similar experiences in traumatic loss. Both lose their mothers to illness suddenly and while they are young. Both of their mothers are remembered as wise and empathetic carers who challenge their children to see the world differently, and the novel utilises each woman's affinity for art to achieve this. For George, the memories of the way her mother speaks about art represent the permanent sense of loss of the opportunity to know her better, but also artefacts which, if examined in detail, could reveal hidden layers in her mother's identity. She recalls on the trip to Ferrara how her mother had told her the story of how in another city in the 1960s a flood had damaged some frescoes in another city but revealed the artist's underdrawings,¹²⁰ which in some instances differed dramatically from the final frescoes, '... something they'd have never discovered if there hadn't been the damage in the first place.'

This description is not unlike the impact Carol's death has on George, which inspires George to celebrate and investigate her mother's life, including her surveillance and eventual in-person confrontation with Lisa. Carol challenges George to think about which came first, the underdrawing (literally created first) or the fresco that they can see. '...the first thing we see, her mother said, and most times the only thing we see, is the one on the surface. So does that mean it comes first after all? And does that mean the other picture, if we don't know about it, may as well not exist?' Eventually, she asks 'Which comes first... what we see or how we see?' (89-90.) This challenge to her daughter to expand her ways of seeing positions the narrative to

¹¹⁹ Smith has also been known to venture into speculative fiction of the ghostly protagonist variety as in *Hotel World*— the ambiguity around who or what Franchesco's spirit is, along with the parallel structure of the storytelling (and publication) invites a discourse on its own construction.

¹²⁰ Likely a reference to the flooding of the Arno River into Florence in November of 1966. Considered the most catastrophic flood to occur in the region in centuries, the flood resulted in the deaths of dozens of people and the damage or destruction of numerous works of art, architecture, and historical artefacts. The year *How to Be Both* was first published, 2016, marked the 50th anniversary of the disaster: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/04/florence-flood-50-years-on-the-world-felt-this-city-had-to-be-saved>

explore meaning in del Cossa's pictures as well as George's drive to better understand her mother through surveiling Lisa and mining her own memories for meaning. The passage positions the novel to present Franchesco's perspective, which, like del Cossa's art is layered.¹²¹

As the creator of the portrait, Franchesco views the work with a more critical and technical eye than George: '...someone's put it in a frame / very nice frame / and the stonework in it, uh huh, the cloakwork good, no, *very* good the black of it to show the power, see how the cloak opens to more fabric where you'd expect flesh to be, that's clever, revealing nothing...'

After bringing the narrative directly into the art, Franchesco begins to do what George does not, which is to interrogate the piece. In particular the artist tries to recall why Christ is depicted as an old man, leading to intimations of the corrupt, classist, and, for a person who is biologically female living as man, dangerous culture that del Cossa had to navigate in order to paint professionally:

Wait —cause— think I remember : something : yes, I pity some hands, 2 hands below his (I mean His) feet : something you'd only see if you really looked, hands that belong to the angels but all the same look like they don't belong to anyone : like they're corroded with gold, gold all over them like sores turned into gold... (192-3.)

This is a reference to the wealth and corruption of the social elites who commissioned the work; painting a god in their own image and showing it held up with golden hands, particularly with the negative, descriptive language around this golden hue, evocative of disease, corruption, and idolatry, in addition to Franchesco's resentment in having to navigate these social eschelons in order to paint.

Franchesco's description of Cosmo's work is indistinguishable from the personal, judgemental sense Franchesco has of Cosmo as a self important, frivolous person: 'showy Cosmo's showy saint, mad, laughable, his hand in the air holding the rock up high about to stone himself so the patrons get their money's worth : look at the tree all gesture-bent unnatural behind him...' (194). Observing that even the

¹²¹ The theme of duality carries forward as Geoge struggles to recall whether Carol had said 'I'm an open book' or 'I'm an unopen book', in effect enabling her to be both at once: a generous and honest parent, and a woman privately exploring a romantic avenue in response to uncertainty in her own happiness in her marriage.

surrounding tree has a physical reaction to the saint indicates del Cossa's perception of his rival's tendency to perform, to a sycophantic degree, the expectations of his patrons who are so entitled that they see their interests as having dominion over everything. The artwork and del Cossa's reactions to it therefore become an inroad for Franchesco to recall a prior life, and although the rivalry with Cosmo appears to be almost humorous, a darker undercurrent is introduced when, at various moments when recalling Cosmo, del Cossa repeatedly says '*I forgive*'.

Interestingly the artist's perspective when returning to life is far more focused on George, whom Franchesco believes to be a boy, both positioning how a 15th Century Italian painter would view a long-haired adolescent sitting unaccompanied and, crucially, a suggestion of why Franchesco might have a different perception of gender in the first place. Learning how to see is a prevalent theme in the novel, not only in the way art is described and experienced, but using those descriptions and ways of seeing to engender a persistent examination of art and memory for hidden detail that can reveal a greater truth. This is the ability that Franchesco utilises to understand that George has suffered an immense loss:

It tells me just to be near him is something akin to when you find the husk of a ladybird that has been trapped, killed and eaten by a spider, and what you thought on first sight was a charming thing, a colourful creature of the world going about its ways, is in reality a just hollowed out and proof of the brutal leavings of life.

Here, Smith guides the reader in how to see George's grief by introducing a dialogical vantage point. Viewing her as one might a painting, again ekphrasis in its most classical sense, Franchesco is able to perceive and, using vivid, violent language (trapped, killed, eaten), convey George's affect and sense of emptiness in what outwardly appears to be a vivacious approach to daily life. Franchesco goes on to make a critical if expository point relative to the artist's ability to perceive affect almost empathetically:

It is a feeling thing, to be a painter of things : cause every thing, even an imagined or gone thing or creature or person has essence : paint a rose or a coin or a duck or a brick and you'll feel it as sure as if a coin had a mouth and told you what it's as like to be a coin, as if a rose told you first-hand what petals are, their softness and wetness held in a pellicle of colour thinner and more feeling than an eyelid... (228-9)

Evoking the prosopopoeial runs alongside a flurry of intimated details from Franchesco's own life, from a father who made a living building brick walls, to the duck that even George finds striking on the visit to the Palace of Not Being Bored with Carol, suggesting in her the ability to sense, but without interpersonal context not to expound, on Franchesco's feelings while the work on the fresco was undertaken:

There are ducks. There's a man with his fist round the neck of a duck. The duck looks really surprised, like it's saying *what the f—*. Above the duck's head there's another bird just sitting there completely free. It's sitting next to the man and its watching him throttling the duck as if it's quite interested in what's happening.¹²²

George's ability to recognise narrative and syntax within art is certainly informed by Carol and carries forward into her examination of the portrait at the National Gallery.

Despite fond memories and the recollection of grief affect as a child, Franchesco does not have the same drive to understand and recover an absent mother that George does. She is much younger when her mother dies, but her chosen male name, Franchesco, is inspired by her mother's first name. However, like George, Franchesco's mother teaches the artist how to see, and in juxtaposition, the similarities between Franchesco and Carol are much clearer.

Given Smith's intentionality in structure and 'bothness,' the mismatch between Franchesco and George's perceptions of their mothers and their loss is somewhat incongruous, asymmetrical amid a balanced duality of narratives. As Franchesco and George's memories unfold, this incongruity makes the connection between Carol and Franchesco clear as people who used art to subvert the embedded sexism within their societies that sought to hold them back. This similarity also appears to help Carol recognise intentional, subtle clues in Franchesco's fresco that she is a woman, despite acknowledging that the chances of this are slim. Carol's intentionality in revealing hidden layers in Franchesco's work positions George to later understand that Carol herself possesses hidden layers — at times demonstrated through her depth of knowledge and keen observation — culminating also in the hidden life that she attempts to keep for herself (after she is doxed online for her

¹²² Smith, p. 43.

Subverts work, Carol harbours a strong suspicion that she is being ‘monitored’ by the government and leaving room for speculation that Lisa is involved in this). The ekphrasis contains symbolism that speaks to the idea of hidden layers outside of the artwork itself, representing a key theme within each protagonist’s character arc: for George, coming to terms with not only the loss of the mother she knew, but aspects of her mother that she will never fully know. For Franchesco, the mistreatment in the art community and a suggestion that Cosmo ¹²³ stole the Marsyas picture, the transgression the artist repeatedly forgives, as Franchesco recalls covering Cosmo in it for warmth as he was in his death bed.

Both Carol and Franchesco face rejection marked by broader social failures to accept their perspectives. Where for Carol this is represented in the form of threats and doxing, for Franchesco, this is in Cosmo’s failure to accept Franchesco’s interpretation of the flaying punishment of the mortal Marsyas for claiming he could play an instrument better than Apollo. Rather than the expected scene of torture with Apollo the clear victor, Franchesco renders this moment as a joyful, Venus-like scene of rebirth, revealing a woman emerging from beneath the cloak of Marsyas’s skin:

right now though I’ve found the way to tell it : the god stands to one side, the unused knife slack in his hand : he has an air near disappointment : but the inner body of the musician is twisting up out of the skin in a kind of ecstasy like the skin’s a thick flow of fabric coming rich in one piece off the shoulder and peeling away at the same time from the wrists and the ankles in little pieces like a blown upward snow of confetti : the body appears through the skin’s unpeeling like the bride undressing after the wedding : but bright red, crystal red : best of all the musician catches the skin over the very arm it’s coming off and folding itself, neat.¹²⁴

For Franchesco, subverting and queering this myth mirrors the artist’s own story and identity: the bothness of gender, and an unrelenting artistic commitment to reflect the world authentically, as Franchesco sees it —not as patrons dictate it to be depicted. The theft of this critical work intended to celebrate identity is therefore more than personally wounding to Franchesco; it is in effect an erasure of identity. Its story

¹²³ Cosimo Tura, a contemporary of Francesco del Cossa, whose portrait of Saint Jerome that Franchesco describes, is part of the permanent collection at the National Gallery (though at the time of writing it is in room 5, not 55). See: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/cosimo-tura>.

¹²⁴ Smith, p. 360.

straddles the line between what it connotes in Franchesco's oppressive social surroundings and what it denotes both in the story of the myth and the fate of the work.

Carol's voice is almost reflected in Franchesco as the ghost contemplates the knowledge that life has ended. As a ghost Franchesco is both aware and accepting that consciousness has restarted after a death that occurred too young,¹²⁵ and channels a kind of grief, albeit briefly, through ekphrasis: sketching a boy carrying a silken tunic and a torch who ran past as Franchesco both flirted with a girl in the doorway and sought to prove artistic ability for a scout from the house of D'Este. In describing the act of creating the art, Franchesco feels a tremendous sense of loss, knowing that the sketch likely no longer exists, that the horse is dead, that the scout is dead, and, of course, that Franchesco's own life is over. The touchstone to access this affect, however, is a moment fraught with verve: 'Long gone the life I, the boy and the man I, the sleek good-eyed horse Mattone I, the blushing girl I.'¹²⁶

The repetition of the 'I' pronoun appears to interrupt a complete thought and convey Franchesco's sense of identity and connection to this lost moment of vitality, and perhaps a sense of futility that the work the artist did to capture and immortalise the moment is also lost: 'Long gone, torch bearer Ferrara seen from the back, ink on paper folded torn eaten, wasp nest shredded into air burnt away to ash to air to nothing. ...I feel the loss, the dull ache of it...'.¹²⁷

For George, though, grief is not a dull ache. The impetus to surveil comes from mourning her mother, and trying to come to terms with the details of her mother's life that were unknown to her. George recalls not being able to quite catch the last words Carol spoke in front of her. She said either 'I'm an open book', or 'I'm an unopen book', and not knowing haunts George, who only so recently learned of her mother's close friendship and romance with Lisa. Realising that she knew her mother but didn't know all there was to know about her signifies that she is grieving not only

¹²⁵ The real del Cossa, Smith's muse, is estimated to have lived to around age 40. "Francesco Del Cossa." National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1172.html>.

¹²⁶ Smith, p. 199.

¹²⁷ Smith, p. 200.

the part of her that she knew, but the part of her that she will never have the opportunity to truly know, again reinforcing simultaneity. Before she can fully come to terms with the fact that motherhood is part of Carol's identity but not the sum, and that other facets of her identity will remain unknown, George feels the need to try to understand her better through stalking Lisa. The motivation is the same that inspires her to go to the museum and view del Cossa's portrait: she seeks her mother through pursuing the things that interested her. Emotionally, however, and perhaps because Lisa is a living person, George is able to channel the anger she feels as a result of her mother's death toward Lisa. She despises that she lied to her mother, and caused her emotional pain in the year before she died — an emotion, interestingly, that Francesco initially misinterprets as love.

Witnessing, or the act of seeing, often corresponds with the themes of reversal or subversion in *How to be Both*. George tries to cope with the loss of her mother, while also embarking on the new and exciting experience of first love. However, her grief and affective sense of desolation overshadows even these moments, which later renders her unable to respond to an amorous advance from H (100). When Francesco observes George showing her 'brick wall' to her love interest, H: the two girls wrap the paper wall around themselves, eventually causing the paper to tear and sending the photos that had been attached to it tumbling to the ground. The destruction of the art that represented George's paranoia and figurative sense of being closed off to the world, to parts of her mother's identity that are irrecoverable, and H's ability to not only go beyond this wall, but to help destroy it, fosters a burgeoning sense of recovery in George, who for the first time since her mother's death is seen as herself, and not as someone defined by her loss.

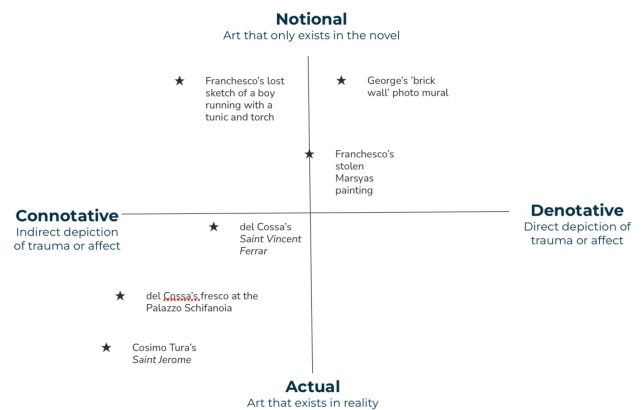
The memories George has of her are punctuated and stained by the weight of the knowledge that she is gone. Within this setting, George creates a 'brick wall' consisting of photographs of the outside of Lisa Goliard's house affixed in a brick-like pattern to a long paper banner.¹²⁸ George takes these photos in response to what she feels was stalking behaviour on Lisa's part toward her mother while she was alive, and again after Carol's death when George observes Lisa's visit to The National Gallery to

¹²⁸ Smith p. 296.

look only at a del Cossa portrait and surmises that she does so for the same reason that George is there: to feel closer to her mother, who loved del Cossa's work, forcing her eventually to admit that, however the relationship may have begun, what she has is evidence for love.

The ekhprasis Smith employs to explore traumatic loss focuses less on incorporating the surrounding environment than it does on adding complexity and dimension through an additional

perspective that is itself literally fragmented. In the narrative attached to Franchesco, this creates dimension in the novel's rendering of George's affect. Yet it appears structurally necessary within the novel that George's mourning ritual includes the pursuit of a closer understanding of Franchesco's work and hidden messages. Franchesco does not come back to life until George has visited 'St Vincent of Ferrar' seven times and considered it deeply. In the end, this intentional act of seeing what the artist needed.



Conclusion

As trauma is a lived reality as unique in specific circumstances and specific affects as the humans who suffer and survive it, taking a purely epistemological approach to exploring it — whether constructivist or deconstructivist (or post-deconstructivist) — tends to fall short. Trauma on its own is not trying to ‘tell’ us anything, and at the same time, by nature, it resists attempts to make meaning from it. It is universally fracturing, and no two fractures are perfectly identical. Regardless of intent, failing to honour and acknowledge this risks flattening and generalising the real pain of real people in order to advance an agenda or affirm a consequent in a longstanding argument between schools of thought.

Instead, ekphrasis offers a different way to explore trauma representation in novels, one that acknowledges individual affect whilst incorporating critically significant context. Just as the experience of trauma is entangled within the broader forces of culture, society, history, and identity, the way we experience art is entangled with the same forces. Yet where trauma fractures, art can reflect. A drastic shift in the way a person see themselves or the world can be reflected in a drastic shift in the way they experience and react to a visual work. There are many aspects of day-to-day life that may be experienced passively, but art asks for purposeful attention, and its experience requires it —seeing, rather than merely looking. The viewer is primed to notice detail and to contemplate the work, and the way that work is perceived, as embodied in its ekphrastic description, can reflect and reveal trauma and its affect.

Whether that work is hanging in a museum or on a child’s bedroom wall provides crucial context and invites contemplation that can extend beyond the novel into the construction of fiction.

Nonlinearity can be particularly effective in avoiding an oversimplification of the depiction of trauma affect within a fictional narrative. Exploring the shifts that arise between connotative and denotative depictions within both notional and actual ekphrastic description is significant in the pursuit of representing and understanding affect without forcing ‘meaning’ into the experience of trauma itself. Ultimately this can strengthen the argument that ekphrasis in a trauma affect context is, primarily, an effective device for exploration and contemplation.

We have explored how Hans Lund's spatial-contextual ekphrasis can be applied to enact traumatic affect in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* through a close examination of the painting's physical proximity to Theo, as well as its physical dimensions. Theo does not misremember the explosion, but he does lack the desire (though as narrator certainly not the ability) to speak about his trauma. The spatial-contextual ekphrasis therefore is an enactment of the affect Theo experiences but does not directly explain. However, there is another application of this same ekphrastic concept in trauma affect representation, in which the spatial-contextual ekphrasis acts as a touchstone, a means for the narrative to explore or access trauma memory rather than a representation of affect in and of itself as seen in both Hustvedt's *What I Loved* and Smith's *How to Be Both*.

The use of ekphrasis in specifically in the context of trauma within novels is underexplored as a concept. Leveraging a framework that can allow for both connection and shifting perspectives across real and imagined visual works as these descriptions relate to trauma can help explore nuance in the ways ekphrasis describes fixed art object, whilst flexing contextually into its narrative environment, including changes in perspective.

Although the framework doesn't extend beyond specific instances of ekphrasis, there are opportunities to explore and incorporate broader affect theory and constructivist approaches, race and class in particular, along with broader, more complex trauma instances both caused and exacerbated by exogenous factors, such as inter-generational trauma. All three authors of the works explored in this thesis are written by white women. Although it is certainly possible to imagine identities outside of those we have, limited diversity within authorial voices and character representation is a limitation in this thesis, and therefore, in the way the proposed framework is used. Further research into the concept of ekphrasis within novels that depict trauma should include a more intentional approach to representation in order to more fully explore the concept as it applies across broader facets of identity in British and American novels.

Additionally, the concept presented in this thesis creates an opportunity to extend beyond the current use of ekphrasis to incorporate where contemporary culture tends to focus on art —does ekphrasis need to be purely visual? Further exploration may include investigating whether this framework can similarly apply to the way novels approach descriptions of art in mediums that are not exclusively visual, such as music, performance art, and theatre. Music is particularly challenging. Given not only how emotive, but how accessible music is, would the inclusion (or omission) of words and lyrics within the art complicate the framework, would this limit nuance or extend it? Would the ubiquity of music impact the sense of space that classical ekphrasis provides? These examples extend beyond the parameters of this thesis, but may be interesting to explore as an extension of the conceptual framework presented here.

Although trauma resists the convenience of straightforward narrative, part of our contemplation of affect requires us to acknowledge the reality that we will always try to make sense of things. The human ability to conceive of what is otherwise impossible is older than fiction. More than a juxtaposition of the visual and the verbal, more than a rhetorical device for historicising a narrative, ekphrasis enables a prosopopoeial exploration of affect that both acknowledges its inherent incomprehensibility — and the pursuit of understanding it anyway. In the following novel, I attempt to explore this desire for understanding through both notional and actual ekphrasis.

A Temple With Your Name

1.

HAIDEILIA
DECEMBER, 2021

I replay the video on the train to Brooklyn. Just to see if I can see it the way Sami said in our session: explanations are not excuses, and you can feel empathy for someone without forgiving them.

This version starts with the old psychiatric research footage, the only one the library staff were able to help me digitize. It's dubbed over in Russian for some reason, but definitely the study from Pittsburgh, where Ava was born and raised.

The video, clearly from the 60s, consists of five different scenes featuring five different babies, each about a year old. Too young to talk. The scenes are cut together crudely, jerkily, and in each the setting is the same, a strangely blank room with a bare, yellowed wall. Before it, a simple wooden high chair. In each scene, a doctor in a white coat carefully puts a baby in the high chair. A different baby in each three-minute scene.

What they do with each baby is also the same. A moment to observe the infant, take in the staring eyes, the uncertain wobble of the head as the new environment is taken in. Then, a disembodied hand reaches into the shot from camera left and places three red wooden blocks on the high chair tray. The shot is silent to make way for the coming voiceover.

In the first scene, a sweet-looking baby inspects the toys, slack-jawed, then picks up a block in his chubby hand and slams it soundlessly onto the little tray over and over in that universally uncoordinated way babies do. The English language voiceover is discernible beneath the Russian overdub. It's a classically 60s American voiceover, a man with creepy Midatlantic overenunciation. He pronounces the 'h' in 'when.'

‘A child’s attachment style will manifest itself behaviorally within the first few months of life. Here, Richard exhibits a secure attachment style,’ the voice explains, ‘he comes from a loving, attentive family and his parents are able to meet his needs, both physical and emotional, consistently. When he cries from hunger, someone will hear him. His needs are, in large part, anticipated.’

It goes similarly with the second baby, a girl called Mae.

My mother is the third baby.

Her face is chubby at the cheeks but the skin at the top of her head seems pulled too tightly against her skull. A small network of veins is visible at her temples. At first, she seems younger than the other babies, because she is smaller than they are, something the narrator points out. But she isn’t. Her brown eyes are huge and serious.

The hand appears and places the blocks in front of her. She reaches out a tiny hand and touches a block, but stares off camera, at the owner of the hand that put it there. She looks around the room, at the people invisible to the camera who observe her. Her expression is nuanced, intelligent. She glances at the blocks and then back to her watchers as though to say *And what am I to do with these?*

The disembodied hand reappears, and by way of explanation, pushes the blocks a little closer to her. As Ava watches, the hand stacks one block on top of another, un-stacks them, and then retracts itself from the shot. My mother touches one wooden block, tentatively, then after a couple tries succeeds in placing it atop another block, as the hand had done. Another look off camera, as though checking to see how she did.

At this moment the microwave commercial voice from before confirms that ‘Ava spends but a few moments with the toys. She is far more interested in observing the physicians in the room.’ The voice explains that Ava lives with only one parent, her mother. ‘Her father is out of the picture,’ the voice says, explaining that Ava’s mother must work to support herself and her baby and is therefore unable to give her daughter the consistent attention an infant needs. Instead, family members and friends take turns caring for her. ‘Ava exhibits an anxious attachment style. She has

learned to carefully observe those around her, seeking the attention she is usually denied.’ No further detail on her care or living situation is provided.

My infant mother picks up a block and attempts to hand it to the person whose hand put it there.

No matter how many times I watch it I can’t help but feel, with a sick constriction in my throat, that she was trying to transact, to give the owner of the hand what she thought he wanted, so he would interact with her. When he doesn’t take it, she looks at it —*Is something wrong with it?*— then drops it back onto the table with a silent clatter. She looks down at the blocks one last time, then looks away, the spark gone from her eyes. Done with it. It is the most disturbing moment of the video, plain despite the degradation of already low-fidelity footage. Her eyes see nothing and she lifts her hand to her mouth to suck her thumb. The voice explains that the baby has quickly disengaged and retreated into her own world. ‘Thumb-sucking is a self-soothing gesture common in children with this attachment style.’

She does not cry.

The video gracelessly cuts back to the awkward tripod ‘reaction’ footage Ava insisted I take of us in the small, freezing concrete room in the university library where Ava had leveraged her connections to get us permission to visit and view the video during lockdown.

So, the three of us —Ava flanked by her children— sitting in horrified silence after watching the video. Both Ava and I are staring, open-mouthed.

All three of us are still wearing our coats.

‘Why’d Dolly let them do this?’ Jared asks. He’s closest to the camera and seems embarrassed. (Though this was only a year ago, the version of him at 15 looks so much more like a child than he does now.)

Ava looks down at the yellowed papers in her hand —the permission forms, a payment letter, and study information she’d found after Dolly’s death. ‘Well, they paid her,’ she says impatiently, waving the forms. ‘They knew she needed the money. It

says the parent was in the room... the release form —' and to my and Jared's obvious horror all the anger and all the language leaves her.

She lets out a mournful, animal whine.

I reach my arms across her and find Jared's and we hold her like that while she cries and crumples the papers to her chest. Her face isn't visible, but her small shoulders shake a little, and my hand is white against Jared's dark coat, gripping it like Ava will break into pieces if we don't hold her up. Ava gasps.

Jared leans back to look at her and his coat swishes as he touches his face. 'I'm so sorry, Ma.'

The video cuts to black for several seconds because I didn't know how else to transition to the next scene without it.

The horrible unfairness of it, remanding Dolly to *single immigrant mother* status, the sneering, cold diagnosis, contextless, and who knows what they actually told her they were doing with her child? Her baby whom she loved more than anything, a love that extended to me and to Jared, I'm convinced, mostly *because we were Ava's children*.

So easy to imagine young Dolly standing behind the camera, exhausted but still shining with youth, smiling and waving to her baby, eager to show those white-coats how brilliant her daughter is.

Yet undeniably, that baby was malnourished.

You had to take all of it in. Not some of it. All of it went in, and that is the sound that comes from Ava. Yes, what else is there to do but howl?

So, after the black, the last awkward cut and final scene is of Dolly in December of 2019, at the assisted living place. I had just flown back for winter break and decided to surprise her, and I'd wanted to film it.

The video shows my hand on the metal door, pushing it open to reveal Dolly in her easy chair, crocheting a blanket and watching tv with the volume off. She looks tiny and frail. She doesn't notice that I've come in, until I sing '*You're looking sweeeell, Dolly, we can teeeeeell, Dolly,*' and she lights up as her head turns toward the camera.

‘Ay, Haideilialita!’ She drops the crocheting and weakly holds up her arms like a child waiting to be lifted. The oxygen tube makes her sound stuffy. ‘Nobody tell me you come! Ven aquí, how beautiful, oh,’ As I walk closer to her she glances past me. ‘Y mi Ava Teresita? My dolly?’ She looks back to me, just above the camera, expectantly, eyes watery with age.

My dolly. My darling.

I cut out the part where I said ‘Just me, Dolly.’ The recording stops after that, anyway, because I’d wanted to hug her. It’s the last video I have of her.

It’s the worst film I’ve ever made, but I had to do it. Had to document it last summer, when I was trying to forgive Ava for what she did after we returned from her little grief trip to Pittsburgh. For costing me an entire missed semester of school and so much more besides.

There’s no footage of the rest, even if there were it would be just as muddled and stupid as film I do have. I don’t even remember the drive back to Detroit. Just the hyperreal memory of Ava on the floor in the upstairs bathroom, still as death and covered in dark vomit. My mental reel.

The first thing I did hadn’t been to see if she was alive, or to pull out my phone to call for help, but to step inside, close the door behind me, and lock the two of us in.

That was to protect Jared. He was home, I could hear him practicing bass. The rhythm was uneven with the sound of my heartbeat in my ears, I noticed that in the moment. I noticed everything in what felt like an instant: the chip on the counter that had been there forever, the white bath mat that was bunched up at one corner as though Ava had kicked it away from her, the pristine grout work between the tiles I knelt on, intending to look for a pulse.

The dispatcher was quick, all business.

Ava was breathing.

‘My mom took a bunch of pills, she’s unconscious,’ only it was more like ‘mymomtookabunchapillsshe’sunconscious.’

‘Is she breathing?’

Her pale face was covered in tiny red patches, and the skin around her eyes had become purple and inflamed. I hadn't want to touch her. She looked dead.

Flurry of things to do, so nothing had to be real yet. Try to wake her up and move her in case she threw up again and read out the labels of the two pill bottles she'd left next to her, neither of which was empty, and check where her tongue was and say the last time I saw her that day and check her breathing and say if she had done this before.

Even still, I had plenty of time to think about carrying Ava down the stairs.

The dispatcher probably would have advised against it, but it might save precious time. But that would mean Jared seeing her face. I had enough time to be able to rationalize I'd rather watch her die than risk Jared seeing her like this. If he tried, I would hold him back, I would shove him back into his room and hold the door closed. I would put him on the floor if I had to.

Plenty of time to feel a sick relief a the thought of this being It. *Finally*. Not relief for her, for freedom from her pain, but for me. *This will be the last mess I clean up.*

Another tiny room for something huge and unspeakable.

2.

HAIDEILIA
OCTOBER, 2022

The café Leith picked looks Parisian in this early light. It's all out of whack, too pretty for late October, too calm to be New York, and way too warm for having just snowed two days ago.

When I ducked into the subway after seeing Sami, the world was draped in a nighttime horror film mist from the evaporating snow, but now, 25 minutes later in Park Slope, the sunlight has turned it into shimmering, wispy clouds. They roll off the road in a golden springtime light. Kind of creepy.

People are already seated around small garden tables on the narrow patio outside, heaters switched on low, beneath a trellised ceiling braided with seasonal garlands of ivy and evergreen. The tables and chairs are set up for them to sit together and look streetward. An older woman wraps her arms around herself the way Dolly used to. I slip a mask on as I walk past her.

A hand reaches in front of mine for the door a little bell dings when it opens. Leith grins and says 'Morning,' in the same tone people use to say 'Surprise!' while stuffing a hand into his pocket for his own mask. 'Thanks for schlepping all the way out here.'

'No worries. Thanks for getting me out of the house'

Inside, it is darker and louder, light filtering in through thin ivory curtains that only reach halfway up the window, permitting a view of the seasonal trellis outside. The wooden floor creaks beneath us like a comfortable old house, and black and white candid photos line the exposed brick walls. The menu is handwritten in quirky cursive on a black chalkboard that sits high on the wall behind the counter. I like the atmosphere, it's dusky, a little noir maybe.

We join a long line of people waiting.

'Did you see Dr. Terpanian tested positive?'

'No.'

'Yeah, sent an email half an hour ago. So that's half the term officially done.'

‘Ugh.’ I pull the email up on my phoner —NO SEMINAR TODAY— to distract from the memory of Dolly’s face. ‘I’m glad to be done, though. And thanks for bringing me here, this is a... good place to people watch.’

‘You like it?’ he asks with an enthusiasm that makes me put the phone away. Always the striking warmth of someone who doesn’t have trouble falling asleep.

‘Yeah, it’s great. I can’t believe it’s this busy at 7:45, but there you go.’

His eyes smile when he does. He means every emotion he shows. The first time I realized he was handsome, that’s what I saw. Then again, every time I really look, I find most people are beautiful. So maybe good-looking or not good-looking is irrelevant. It’s *attractive*. That’s it.

‘I thought you might. It’s an old haunt.’

‘I’m glad.’ He lifts his glasses over his eyes so he can see the menu better.

When people enter and leave, I get more glimpses of Park Slope through the doorway. Like much of Brooklyn, this is still foreign. Unlike so many places in New York, it looks in real life the way it does in photos: rows of stunning brownstones with even more robust gardens and plant life than I’d have imagined possible in the cold months, curved archways above the doors, pristine streets lined on either side with gleaming cars, parents or nannies pushing strollers, no one walking like they have somewhere to be unless they’re exercising. And trees. Trees everywhere. Completely different pace.

A tap on my shoulder. ‘Hey, there’s a corner table open.’ Leith points to a place near the window. ‘Quick, can you grab it, and I’ll get the drinks? What would you like—it’s on me.’

‘No, that’s ok.’ I touch the bill in my pocket.

‘No, no, come on. I just dragged you to Brooklyn.’

‘Okay. A latte, honestly, would be great. Extra shot, if they can.’ Jesus, that’s probably \$8.

‘You got it.’

I weave my way in between the tightly spaced tables and claim the back corner. Two sweetly mismatched chairs and a tiny, somewhat precarious round table. Tossing my bag onto one of the chairs, I move the other so we can sit closer and face the

whole room. Trying to talk to anyone with my back to the door and this many people would make anyone's skin crawl.

The black and white photos hung on the walls are personal. They are not what I would have expected, no baguette-laden bicycle rides along the Seine, or lovers kissing in front of the Eiffel Tower, or heart-shaped locks on a bridge. None of that. The photos are of friends and families in anonymous living rooms. People who are comfortable having candid conversations in front of the photographer. All of these photos spell comfort and home. The photo above our corner spot is of a beautiful woman curled up on an armchair, reading a book under the soft glow of a lamp. She is wearing long, striped socks and rests her head on her hand. I want to know what she's reading, but the title is hidden in her lap.

Leith is at the other end of the counter now, waiting for the coffees. Though his gait is a little hurried in a way that makes him look boyish, he has weirdly excellent posture when he stands still. Standing next to him often makes me want to try to straighten up. Or run my nails down his back and see if I can rattle his composure. Instead I try running a nail against the grain of this little wooden table, but it's under so much wax and polish, it's become textureless.

It isn't healthy. There's nowhere for us to go from here. What was meant to be a distraction is now the distraction, but only for me. Predictable.

My phone buzzes once in my pocket, and then again. That's Ava's style, one long-winded text, and a brief and-another-thing follow on. She's probably angry I ignored her call this morning, and the adrenaline that arose when I did that returns now, enough to make my ears ring.

Later. That can wait until later. Odds are since I sent her to voicemail she's been stewing about it and has found another reason to reach out. About Jared again, most likely, how I need to be a better sister, how much he's struggling at his high school — carryover from my decision to return to New York over the summer. *You betrayed me, you abandoned me, I needed you.*

That's the likeliest to come up next from the greatest hits album, how I'm failing my family. Ava grabbing a fistful of her own hair during our video call when I'd told her, nice and early, I wasn't coming home this winter break under the pretense

that I could work full-time at the art gallery for a month. Her curls had grown past the base of her neck.

‘Jared is at risk of *failing out of school*, Haideilia! He is not motivated, and I can’t be the only person looking out for him. His father left. *You* left. I have been through a lot this year, I am supposed to be *healing* and rebuilding my life. Why can’t you support that and participate in this family?’

Monstrous, not to go after that, after everything. Monstrous and necessary.

Trying to explain to her, and I always do try, is like shouting into a high wind. There’s no point in asking her to understand, or to consider me. Understanding would mean owning up to things, admitting what she did and why she did it. Instead, it’s ‘How many more times, Haideilia? How many more times do I need to tell you I’m sorry before you believe me?’

Yet more and more, against my will, I’m pushed closer to a point of no return. More pressure from a wrenching, constant guilt, now means more desperation to escape it. I fantasize about cutting things off entirely, of simply telling her the thought of ever setting foot in that house again fills me with a deep, stomach-turning revulsion. Instead I told her that Jared and I are in touch enough, and though I would never admit it to his face, he is both smarter and far more charming than I am. If he had to repeat Precalc next year, it wasn’t because I wasn’t trying hard enough.

Besides, at twenty-two, I am more convinced than I ever was that I don’t know anything. Why else would I be here, carrying on with Leith what we shouldn’t have started?

There’s a Teasdale poem about wanting to be in love. She describes it as wanting to be as lost as light is lost in the light. But I’ve never been that, never been a light lost in the light. Wanting that seems dangerous. Don’t invest too much of yourself. Otherwise *whoosh*, extinguishment. If that big light goes out, a fragile and structurally important part of me, the rest will follow. Everything inside me is too closely connected to everything else. Shittily wired.

But here we are.

I take a big breath, big bottom-of-the-belly-to-top-of-the-lungs breath, and slowly let it go. The despair loosens its grip but doesn’t go away.

Leith is still at the other end of the counter with a crowd of people who are now also looking at his phone while he waits for the coffees. He plays Spelling Bee on the New York Times app, part of his grief ritual. He and his father used to race to see who could get to 'genius' level the fastest.

A harassed looking barista rushes back and forth behind the counter. If they're understaffed, it's because the COVID numbers are up again, and we probably shouldn't be sitting inside like this.

A bit of a lull in conversation falls across the tables around me.

In one expert motion, a server holding a tray full of plates opens the door and kicks a wedge into place behind her to hold it ajar, letting in the unseasonably warm air and sounds of two women loudly greeting each other outside. The curtain blocks my view of them, so I look back to the grain of the wood table, and try to zero in on what the women outside are saying.

'Michelle told me about that. I said to Doug, there's something we'll have to look forward to in a few years. Pixie! No! Down! —I'm so sorry, Molly.'

'Oh, and who's this?'

'This is Pixie.' Her voice gets high-pitched and cutesy. Chairs scrape across the concrete as they sit. Rattle of a dog collar and leash. 'She is an adorable nightmare. I still can't believe we talked ourselves into getting her. It's like having a baby all over again. —Pixie, ew, no! Get away from that. No, no, no. She's *obsessed* with bird shit, it's the weirdest thing. See? She's —Pixie! *No!*'

Boston Terrier. It sounds like one of those squash-faced breeds whose eyes tend to stare off in different directions. The kind that are so ugly they're cute, and you want to protect them because they're so loving and so stupid. Pixie's tongue sticks out a little, all the time, I bet. Little black button nose and black and cream-colored coat. Pigeon-shit white.

Leith returns at last with the coffee and sits next to me, but not too close. 'I copied you,' he says, setting down the mugs. There is a cocoa powder panda bear face dusted into the foam of my latte. His too. I nod my thanks and touch the handle. It's very hot, fresh from the dishwasher.

Sudden desire to tell Leith about my time working as a dishwasher after I graduated high school, the summer before I left for my big university adventure, but he jumps back up again and heads back to the counter, probably for napkins.

Not worth mentioning that gig, anyway, and risk reminding him that I'm three years younger than he is, or that he's three years older than me, something he points out, though not in an accusatory way, when he can sense a kind of inexperience in me. No, not quite inexperience. Naivety. It's unpleasant. He fails to understand, or maybe I'm the one who fails, that on balance it's all sort of arbitrary. Even at the same age, I'd be wise to things he isn't and vice versa. He's a 25-year-old undergrad student, majoring in *English*. That's old enough for there to be no excuse, according to Steve, who I'm sure was only half-joking. His follow-on fatherly advice was 'Just have fun, H. Play the field.'

I'd rather talk about his research project anyway.

Leith sits back down with the napkins. 'Sorry, about that,' he takes off his mask and pockets it, then pulls his laptop from his messenger bag, but has to keep it resting on his knees because the table is too small to fit both the computer and the coffees. He puts a hand on top of it, as though asking it to refrain from speaking for a moment. 'I should temper expectations by saying I'm likely more excited about this than I ought to be And just thought, with your grandmother's connection to Spain—'

'Jesus, this again?' Does he think mentioning Dolly up is a way to get me to talk about Ava?

'Sorry, I just meant I thought you'd find it kind of interesting given your family history, that's all.' His glasses magnify his eyes a little, just enough to be noticeable, and it's easier to see a twinge of fear that I'll judge him. But that's another thing that went out the window with a natural smile: the ability reassure anyone.

'Oh, okay. I... misunderstood what you were going for there.'

'No, no, it's my fault. I —here,' He clears his throat, and launches into his explanation. 'So, I think I've organized all of Dad's papers now, and I think I'm finally on to something. I think he was starting to work on a collection of Redding's letters. I found some notes of his where he's drawn connections between Redding's poetry and personal correspondences he had at the time. It's unclear where he was going with

that, I think maybe he was kind of in the early stages of it, kind of sketching around an idea...'

'Maybe he was interested to see if he could sniff out some of Redding's inspiration.'

'Yes, kind of. But actually I think he was looking for something specific. Though to be fair, whether you admit it to yourself or not, whenever you write something, you're writing it to be read. So just because the letters were personal doesn't mean they weren't going to be well-crafted, or a place for him to kind of tease out a thought. I mean, they *were* filtered; they had to be...' He blinks rapidly, and realises he's derailed.

I look away first, and drink my panda.

Leith allows a petal of silence to fall before continuing. 'Anyway, to make a long story short, a few years ago, Dad bought a bunch of letters from an estate sale that he was able to have authenticated as written by Redding, who had died by then. And truth be told, I scanned some of them months ago and they were a bit boring, so I kind of shelved it. But I finally went through them after we —after we went to the library and holy shit. There are a handful *to and from* someone called Ramón. Just Ramón, Redding doesn't use his last name, or formally write his address on the letter, and there are no *envelopes* for them, which is even weirder —a lot of these letters go folded back up into the original envelope. And weirdest of all, they are quite personal, and span decades, my dad had absolutely no idea who the hell this was.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. He had printed out scans of the letters from the estate sale so he could notate them. And most of them were highlighted, he wrote all over them. It took me forever to figure out his shorthand system for endless books and references, provenance, but when I got to Ramón's letters?' He holds up his index finger. 'One. One note. On a post-it. And all it said was,' he traces the outline of a question mark in the air.

'Damn.'

'Haideilia, it's so odd. Dad's written books, *plural*, about this man. Including a biography. He's *interviewed* him.'

‘What the hell was in the letters?’

Leith opens his laptop. ‘This one was set apart from the others, it was on Dad’s desk,’ he says, ‘Top of his to-do pile. It’s the last one to Ramón, and the shortest, dated a few months before Redding died.’ He’s about to hand his laptop to me, but hesitates. ‘You don’t have to read it if you don’t want to.’

‘After that preamble, are you kidding?’ It does feel more than a little voyeuristic, but then again it’s only me.

He shrugs. ‘Fair enough.’ He opens the laptop, minimizes a couple of documents, and hands it over.

‘I’m not about to read a confession to a murder, am I?’

He smiles, but it’s a sad one. ‘No.’ It comes out as more of a whisper.

27 July 2014

Dear Ramón,

And then winter arrives. There are desperate nights when, before I realize I'm doing it, I attempt telemetric communication with the cold, burning vacuum, insisting: "Now see this reading here, these anomalies I have collected over the years," tapping with an impatient finger the strangest sensor data you have amassed. "Explain."

Back in my room, reality is small and final. There are new silences to contend with, ones I never used to be awake for, and also sterile new words, metallic and clunky in the mouth, the physician's examination instruments dropped into a tray of alcohol. Done with you.

War is waged between the menacing wheeze that has made a home in my lungs and the idiot golden retriever that is my rebounding impatience for it to "go away". I've learned to hate certain pharmaceutical logos and other shapes: Spherocylinder, caduceus, helix... Helix too like a memory I have of gently pulling a ribbon free from her hair one June evening, many years ago, how it kept that shape in the grass between us... That single curl. Now on a pin our children wear to remember her by. And eventually, me.

I want to tell you I'm sorry. I want so badly to mean it.

SR

Leith is looking into the middle distance when I finish reading. His arms folded, and doesn't look at me when I close the laptop and lean back in my chair, a tightness in my chest and feelings I'm too slow to process in the moment which means they'll go unprocessed. Chasing a single emotion is like trying to grab at a gnat flying in an annoying zigzag too close to my face.

The only option is to let him dissect it. 'So fewer than ten years ago he died of...?'

Leith clears his throat. 'Cancer, yeah,' he says. 'Like my dad. —Different kinds, obviously.' He unfolds his arms and drums a finger on the table.

'I'm so sorry.'

He waves a hand and his expression clouds for a moment. 'On one hand, it makes me think Dad read this and must have felt so close to him, you know? So personal. He was going through that. Knowing fully what we all know but can't really dwell on, and yeah in the face of that, love and regret come up. For him, for a terminally ill person...' His eyes don't mist over and his voice doesn't betray him, but it's clear he can't continue the thought. We make eye contact for a moment, then he breaks away.

'It's a beautiful letter. I'm so glad your dad got to read it.' A best guess. I don't know if it's beautiful. I don't know what someone like Redding would have had to be sorry for, though if he was a writer and he had kids, probably a fair bit. There's no way you can be both an artist and a parent. All-in on one, or half-ass both.

He sniffs. 'It was sitting out, actually. On his desk, top of his to-do pile. The original, not a copy. I found it after, it took me a while to realize it belonged with the collection from the estate sale.' He loses his thread for a moment, and searches for it in the air. 'What I meant to say is, everyone's experience is different, and Redding was pretty old, so maybe he was used to illness or chronic pain. But the truth is, death is ugly. Cancer's *definitely* ugly.' His face is a perfect mask of disgust, something I've never seen in him before, as he looks at the table and remembers. 'Fighting to survive is so *hideous*, all-consuming... the, the, physical reality of it, of being in pain essentially all the time, it just overrides everything.'

‘Yeah, okay, he mentions wheezing. *I can wheeze when I’m sick. It’s so aseptic, in a sense. The real battle to find and hold onto dignity is having to tell someone you love, as an adult, you know, hey, I’m so weak that I couldn’t get up in the night and I had a coughing fit and shit the bed. And I can’t clean it up. — Dignity,*’ he starts bouncing a knee. ‘It takes your dignity. That’s what bothers me. How dignified that letter is. He talks about death, but I guess it feels dishonest, in that sense.’

‘I think that’s a fair reaction.’ Then again, maybe it’s about reclaiming dignity. At least he was conscious. At least he could still write.

Now it is quiet around our little stool of a table. The café carries on with its cheerful bustling. The barista is not making eye contact with her coworkers.

Such a relentless loss, Leith’s. No way to ameliorate losing a parent. Because when the anger subsides, all that’s left is getting used to thinking of his dad as a memory, instead of being jolted by reminders that he’s gone, and you can’t go back from that point. At least, that’s how it was after Dolly. Remembering doesn’t hurt in the same way, when you work so hard not to.

The woman in the photograph above our table keeps her eyes on her book. Everything about her is girlish—the striped socks, the way she’s folded up in her chair, head on hand—but her eyes are what show it isn’t an act. They’re not unfocused in that self-conscious way people can be when they realize a ‘candid’ photo is being taken. She was sitting like that for real and reading for real, and someone she knew saw how lovely she was in that moment, without trying to be, and had to do it.

Leith follows my gaze. ‘Hmm.’

‘I want to know what she’s reading.’

‘I think she’s trying to escape. Just go all the way into another world.’

She doesn’t look trapped.

He opens the laptop and rereads the letter before I can ask what on earth made him think that. His lips set in a grim line.

Granted, Dolly was old, too, that’s another major difference in grieving the dead. She had enough health problems that it was surprising only to Ava when they told us she couldn’t be intubated. And unlike Ava and Jared’s goodbye call, hours prior to mine... by the time that exhausted nurse in a face shield and so much PPE I

couldn't even guess what she looked like took my video call and held up the phone to her, she was already unconscious.

'She's asleep, but she can hear you,' that's what she'd said, and moved the phone so close to Dolly's pale, deflated face that I had to look away in horror, stammering an I love you and other things I can't really remember to my bedside lamp. Her last memory all wrong, her face all wrong, both her and not at all her, that I would have thought she was already dead if not for the sounds of the steady beeping of machines around her and the ragged, awful sound of her breathing. A decidedly un-'aseptic' wheeze. 'It's better this way,' the nurse said, when she pulled the phone away and I thanked her for letting me call.

That line, at least, was believable. Better to be unconscious. And better for me to be able to press a button and already be in my room, in bed, with a pillow to wail into and no one else to hold up, privacy to rock back and forth in the insane rhythm of a new grief.

Very different from what he's moving through. I don't think he has permission to stop moving.

Still, there are other ways to think about it. 'Maybe that's what he's doing, in a way,' I venture. 'The letter. Writing that way, maybe he was able to escape reality a little, and reclaim his dignity, in a way. Providing all the details would maybe be more honest, but it's also humiliating, and that makes it harder if you're trying to make sense of things. And definitely harder on his friend. Maybe part of the calculus wasn't so much pretending it wasn't undignified but just editing to protect his friend.' Dolly never would have wanted me to see her like that.

He gives the tiniest ascent that this is possible. A ghost of a nod. 'Though he did say he *wants* to be sorry. He ends with "I'm not sorry."'

'Yes, true. What's he not sorry about?'

'I don't know. Dad has letters from someone named Ramón addressed to Redding. But no clue in them about bad blood between them.' He takes a deep breath. 'The non-apology comes after he refers to his wife, well a woman. Maybe her? Maybe the "she" wasn't his wife?'

He look is a little intense, like he's hoping I've divined something new from the letter. 'Not enough to go on in this letter to figure it out.'

He purses his lips again, bracing to move on before taking in a long, hissing breath. 'Well, let it never be said that I don't know how to bring down the mood.' He grimaces. 'But at any rate, this is a long wind-up to saying I think I want to find him. Ramón. I want to figure out who he is. Well, was.'

'Oh.' If his own father, who built a career as a scholar of Redding and other modernists didn't know, this is unknowable. I sip my latte to buy time. 'Tall order.'

'But not impossible,' he wants something from me again.

Aha the real reason I'm here. 'It's worth a chase, I guess.'

He brightens a little. 'I knew you'd get it.'

It's understandable. The timing of the losses, our strange bond. If he needed permission from someone, I could see why he would try here. On a practical level, it wouldn't be possible for him to carry on his father's work in any other way, except for handing it over to a colleague who knows what they're doing. But he doesn't have to be an expert in early postmodern poetry to do this research. It's improbable, but technically *possible*. Maybe he thinks all I have to process is the death of a grandparent, and his generosity in involving me in this distraction will give me some perspective.

But he's too careful to never talk about Ava for that to be true.

'The other letters reveal more about him, Ramón,' Leith says. 'He was born in Spain but was evacuated to England pretty early on into the civil war in the late 30s. Thousands of children were. And I think his parents were executed because Redding mentioned in a letter that he and his wife paid their respects to them at a Republican memorial. I think it was a mass grave. Republicans were progressive, right? It was the Nationalists who were for,' he squints his eyes shut. 'The dictator, what's his name...'

'Franco.'

He slaps the table. 'Thank you, yes. And his family ran a small restaurant or inn, oh, and he writes about this baker from Eastern Europe who lived across from them and seemed to be important to the family. Redding said he recalled Ramón explaining that people just called him "The Russian." Titular. The. Russian. Grammatically, that can't be right, but that's how Ramón writes it.'

‘El Ruso.’ I wiggle my eyebrows.

‘What?’

‘El Ruso. Means “the Russian” in Spanish. Sorry. *The Russian.*’

He blinks at me. ‘Do you speak Spanish?’

‘I can only say “the Russian.”’ Fortunately he grins in reply. ‘No, not really. She really only spoke English with us, my grandmother, but it was always kind of jumbled. So I had a leg up in school. —Ava understands fluent Spanish, though.’ I’ve said too much and try to make it clear in my expression that I don’t want follow up questions.

‘Huh.’ He’s wise to that, as suspected. ‘Wonders never cease.’ He looks at me in a way a little too akin to taking stock, re-evaluating something. ‘I took French in school. Useless so far.’ He doesn’t look away.

Maybe under normal circumstances I would but it’s a warm December day and this is the closest I’ve come to feeling anything like excitement in so long. ‘C’est dommage.’

His smile is so delighted it makes me glow. He raises his mug and takes a sip.

‘You know, for whatever it’s worth, I think your dad would have been really proud of you, Leith.’

He nods down at his coffee and adjusts his glasses. ‘Thank you,’ he says simply.

I shouldn’t, but I want to touch him, put my hand over his. It’s right there, on the table. Vivid. I can see the fine lines in his skin, between his pores. A pale, crescent-shaped scar on the knuckle of his middle finger.

I know no other way forward for either of us than continued distraction, so I start telling him about Nikki’s shows picking up, her band playing venues around town and in New Jersey. Maybe we could go together. Moral support, and all. He leans in, the old enthusiasm revving back up, and a tiny bird that lives in my chest beats its wings.

‘I’ve never been to a metal show.’

‘Brace yourself,’ it comes out more with more honesty than I intended. ‘I mean, Nikki is ridiculously talented — you know that, you’ve heard her practice. She can belt. And her presence is just huge. But there’s also a good deal of screaming and

I've found the shows are a just *lot* if you're not super into metal. That's why Ben and I go together. Tag team.'

'Wait, you're not "super into metal"?' he teases.

'It's a month's worth of energy, these shows. You'll see. And she has one coming up where they're opening for someone, going to have a decent crowd. I remember it'll be a Friday, day of the week is a big deal. So, if you'd like a definite distraction from all the productivity...'

'Sounds like fun.' Noticing my expression, he amends, 'An *experience*.'

Fun is not the word. Everything I've learned about going to shows like these, I've learned the hard way. Earlier on, Nikki would gig at small venues where a bunch of people in black would stand far apart from each other, fold their arms, and stare at the stage. Unnerving, but manageable. Though it made me feel awful for Nikki, giving so much and getting nothing back. Now, the venues are still small but the energy is completely different. Movement is constant, and there are more people. I don't like it when the high school and college boys get amped up and start with the overenthused stomping around and shoving. Impossible to predict based on venue alone. It depends on the mood of the people there. It would be funny if I were watching it on TikTok, not ten feet away.

Not worth thinking about. 'So tell me more about the Russian—'

Shouting is coming from outside on the street, loud enough for conversation in the café to halt and for people to turn their heads toward the windows. Thanks to the curtains, it's impossible to see what's going on, but by the sound of it, two men are arguing, shouting across the street at each other.

The server from before reopens the door and kicks the stopper back into place and now we can see them.

The one on the far side is scarily tall and broad and wears a stained apron—a butcher?—that could have been comical but it's part of him, that's clear, tough guy who wears an apron. It's an inelectable truth, like his wide-eyed rage. He seems ready lunge into the street, but instead calls the other man a fuck-face, and when that guy—who's wearing a helmet—doesn't have much to say to this, Apron turns back toward the shop he apparently ran out of to tell him off.

That seems to be the end of it. The end of a blue streak I wish I'd heard more of.

The server who propped open the door re-enters the cafe, shaking her head. 'Let me tell you, New York is New Yorking,' she says to the barista, who still looks both combative and frazzled. 'Dude was driving a Vespa down the sidewalk.'

'A *Vespa*?' the barista pulls down their mask to enunciate the word.

I catch Leith's eye as we laugh, and for now it's enough.

'Yeah! He almost took out a kid. JJ came out and started screaming at him.'

Across the street there is just enough time to see the silver shop door glinting in the light as it closes.

3.

RAMÓN
JULY, 1936

More gitanas came into town during the springtime. Ramón liked them. They were interesting, and they didn't ignore children.

'I've seen them walking around half naked,' Ramón's mother said, 'a baby on each breast, like this, out for the world to see, in front of *churches*, my God,' she held her hands out in front of herself as though shooing one away.

Ramón often waited out the time as Mamá spoke to her friends on the patio. They all drank tinto and only spoke about people who weren't there. Papá would let Ramón try tinto sometimes, but Mamá never would. So he decided to wait until she finally agreed that there was nothing to do around the taverna —nothing to fold, no tables to help clear— and he would be allowed to go play.

In the main, Ramón observed, gitanas were treated like bees, accepted as part of spring, swatted away only if they came close enough for you to hear them buzzing. Loyalist soldiers loved them, too. It was for that reason that on golden spring evenings, the gitanas would stay in the plazas, knowing more would be there, and his mother and the women would be left alone awhile to gossip and stare at each other, and whatever else it was women did.

The taberna was very close to a plaza, but not easy to find unless you knew what you were doing. As such, on weekday evenings, the only customers were the regulars. Sometimes, a couple of union organizers would wander in, different every time, but always in pairs and the same friendliness, complimenting Mamá's flowers growing down the white walls, and in windowsills, all that colour against so much white. Once they had a camera and took pictures of the cobblestone roads, Sr. De León guiding his mule with baskets full of alfalfa hay up the road, and Ramón's sister and her girlfriends riding their bikes back and forth from the park. What was so special about that pockmarked old road, he wondered. Perhaps it was famous. His father and El Ruso took turns hosing it down every morning — well, Papá did when he could.

Maybe roads were never hosed down wherever the loyalists came from, or they

had no time for flowers. He tried to imagine the things they might overlook at home, and thought of an icy window. Or wide roads. Tío Timo told him in Madrid, a single car lane is three streets wide, and there was a road that went along the southern coast, west to east, and you could drive in a straight line from sun up to sun down without running into anything.

‘You could go further than that,’ El Ruso said, blowing a cloud of smoke through his nose like a dragon, ‘If you went south to north.’ Everyone thought El Ruso fathered a child by one of the gitanas, because he was always giving them bread. ‘Guilt bread,’ his mother called it. ‘They get free money all day, they have more money than we do, they all live in a castle in a town not far from here. They walk home and hang their tambourines and laugh as they count their money, because tomorrow they’ll go dancing again,’ she made a face to spit but was too ladylike to follow through. ‘They don’t need his help. That’s guilt bread.’ But Ramón wasn’t so sure. For one thing, El Ruso made all the bread for the restaurant, and how could his mother allow herself to conduct business with him if he really had a bastard running around and living in the streets?

There were two bakeries in town, El Ruso’s and Monteguillo’s. ‘Look,’ Ramón’s father would say, sitting up in bed and pointing at the bedroom window through which they could see the sign above El Ruso’s bakery. ‘This is how you know what’s what. His sign says what? Read it.’

Breathing deeply, Ramón could smell his father: A warm-bed scent blanketed over by the smell of stale sweat, which grew stronger once you noticed it, like it was reaching towards you. It made him feel sick and something else, something darker and harder to name. He was determined not to show these feelings to Papá for fear of embarrassing him.

‘Bakery,’ Ramón said. He looked through the window and focused on the hand-painted sign, the careful, light blue letters which El Ruso retraced every year. ‘It just says “Bakery.”’

‘That’s right. And when you pass Monteguillo’s, what does the sign say? What’s written there?’

‘Monteguillo’s.’

‘Ah! See? That's elitist. That's how you know.’ Monteguillo and el Ruso had no rivalry, though, and he was often helping at the bakery, which was larger. Combining resources was smart, Papá conceded. ‘Everyone’s doing that of course,’ he said. ‘Unless you count the bourgeoisie. Monteguillo’s clientele, mind you. Fueling the fire that will burn his house down.’

They’d had this conversation before, but there was a happiness to be found in playing along when his father repeated himself, even when he was complaining. Sometimes, Ramón would walk to the window and look down at the sign above the restaurant, trying to see it for the first time. It was all black with pretty white letters that spelled out TABERNA, framed by two orange blossoms his mother painted.

‘See! It doesn’t need a fancy name. The sign is priceless!’ And that would be enough for a story about what a wonderful artist Mamá was, how she should do it in earnest, not just doodles on the backs of flyers.

El Ruso's place was certainly the cosier and plainer of the two bakeries, and in the morning, the front room was hazy with fine clouds of flour that swirled violently whenever someone walked through the entryway. El Ruso wasn't as interested in confectionery, which was where Monteguillo's came in handy. It was big and sunny and always clean, but, according to Ramón's father (his parents had forbidden him to ever set foot inside), the people behind the counter gave you a stodgy once-over as soon as you walked through the door and for enough money, would joylessly bake you a cake. Not that they could afford to turn their noses up to anyone now. They may not have been the nicest people, but as far as Ramón could tell from the window, they didn't seem to support, penitently or otherwise, what his mother referred to as ‘a misbegotten.’

Next to playing football in the park, bothering El Ruso was a favorite past-time for Ramón and his friends. One of the surest ways to nettle him was to ask a lot of questions about his nickname, which he had been given because everyone assumed he was Russian. In reality he was Czech, and his real name was Janek, but no kid would ever call him that, and oddly, he never bothered to insist. He never talked about home. As far as appearances went, he didn’t seem so different from anyone else, provided he kept his mouth shut, but this was seldom.

‘But if you're not Russian, what are you?’ Ramón liked to ask as el Ruso swept outside his shop at the end of the day. There was never much to sweep, really, or if there were, it was the kind of thing you couldn't see. Ramón sensed it was el Ruso's way of pushing one more day away from himself —Mamá always passed one hand over the back of the other at the end of the day, wiping away something invisible. Maybe it was what adults did. But Ramón sensed that unlike Mamá, el Ruso was possibly keeping watch over the street, though for what, if anything, he was on the lookout was Ramón's to dream up.

‘I'm here twenty years now,’ he would insist in the weird rhythm of his accent, tapping his three middle fingers hard against his chest. ‘And anyway, aren't you bored, asking me the same stupid questions every day of your life? Lift that barrel so I can sweep under it.’

‘But how come you let everyone call you el Ruso then? Why not el Checo?’ Ramón struggled with the barrel. It was heavy as a stone wall. El Ruso had trimmed the barrel himself, filled it with black soil, and planted it full of healthy, glowing blue flowers from a Roma girl. They were given out in the plazas and main roads, sometimes with a sprig of rosemary, and you'd have your palm read if you took them. Maybe the trick was in the soil, or the care, but there was no denying the transplanted blooms lasted all season. There were so many, they threatened to spill over onto the pavement —another damning sign, according to Ramón's mother and the other women drinking tinto. Whoever heard of wildflowers lasting even two months? They were held for hours in someone's hand, or in bags, not in the ground. Not an encouraging omen, one way or another: that the gypsies gave El Ruso the magic flowers, or that they somehow flourished by his hand.

‘All the same to me. There are worse a child could call you.’ He waved Ramón off and easily tilted it backward with one hand, and quickly swept beneath it with the other.

‘Like liar?’

El Ruso let the barrel slam back into place with a loud thud. Maybe there was something else in there.

‘Like liar, stupid, Ramón...’ El Ruso ticked off each of these words with a finger,

counting insults, and looked skyward, pretending to think. 'No, can't come up with anything worse than Ramón.'

'Hey!'

El Ruso shrugged, smiled his upside-down smile at the broom.

Ramón felt himself blush in anger. 'Why do you always give bread to the gitanas?' He eyed the blue flowers and fancied he saw them shudder. This was a new question.

El Ruso stopped sweeping. 'So what, you think a Russian would give them bread?' His eyes narrowed.

'A Spaniard wouldn't.'

El Ruso snorted. 'And who told you that? Your mamá?'

'No.'

He went back to sweeping, and for a long while the only sound was the crackling whoosh of the straw against the pavement. 'No one will give them work now, did you know that?'

'No.'

'It's true. The church calls them vermin, and I guess some people love the church,' he held a hand out to the street, like proof was to be found there. 'Me, I can't give them work because then I lose all my business. So sometimes I give them a little bread no one buys.' He gave Ramón a hard look, the sort of thing adults do when something more is meant, but the children are in earshot. Try as he might, Ramón couldn't work out what that was. The flowers simply stared, stood a little straighter, maybe, but gave nothing away.

In Ramón's crowd, the favourite rumour about El Ruso was that he was a spy, or in exile. People said he spoke nine languages and knew how to kill a man with a single pigeon feather. These rumours he neither confirmed nor denied. Instead he seemed quietly delighted to be thought of in such an exotic and dangerous way. Still, there was something about him, like the way his eyes could come to rest on the ground or a wall and seem to look through it — seem, at least, to see what wasn't there, that made Ramón think something terrible had happened to him.

The next day, Alonso, a friend from school, obtained firecrackers through dubious connections with some older boys, which meant, Ramón feared, that they had gotten wet at some point and were now worthless. There were only about a dozen in total, tattered and greying and pitifully twisted onto a faded green fuse. When Ramón was finally freed from the duty of sitting by Papá's bed in case he needed help (it was a bad day for the pain) while Mamá ran morning errands, he caught up with Alonso near the park.

The boy dangled the firecrackers front of Ramón's face with a freckly, mischievous smirk.

'I told you already, they're old, they're not going to do anything.'

'Yes they are, yes they are! I tested one already behind the chicken coop. Just this morning! See?' He pointed to a spot on the fuse that was missing a firecracker. 'And they threw in the matches for free. We just have to think of a good place to light them.'

They thought. The churchyard would be suicide. Any of the nuns or priests, including Tío Timo, would certainly end them on the spot. The plaza would be stupid. In the first place, it was too loud, and now that there were more soldiers around, it was even more crowded.

'What about the alley by the laundress?' Ramón suggested on the walk home.

Alonso wrinkled his nose. 'And do what? Scare some cats? If we're going to scare anything, we should scare el Ruso.'

Ramón gasped. It was a great idea. El Ruso was the obvious choice; much better than wasting them in the park, or scaring cats. He wasn't old enough to frighten to death, and he was the only grown-up who never followed through when he raised his hand. Besides, observing his reaction when startled had potential to confirm the spy theory, or at least make him feel better about getting told off yesterday.

'Imagine what he'd do. He'd grab a tray like a shield and roll on the ground before crouching into a fighting stance,' Alonso said. 'He keeps a submachine gun hidden under the counter. He'll go for that next.'

'Nah, real spies keep it simple. And quiet. He'll just pull a knife from his boot and throw it at the door.'

‘Better stay low, then. Either way, if he’s quick to react, we’ll know he’s a spy.’

El Ruso kept the door wide open in the afternoons because it grew so hot inside. The smell of freshly baked bread drifted into the street in the morning and lingered there in a dense cloud, so much so that when Ramón tried to smell the fireworks for gunpowder, all he could detect was flour.

Not many people were out in the late afternoon, and those who were hardly noticed Ramón and Alonso. The two boys crouched behind the barrel rife with blue flowers, and leaned toward the door to listen. The flowers turned to face Ramón, who carefully strained to inch the barrel away with a foot to make himself harder to see. It wouldn’t budge. He considered for one horrible second the possible repercussions of lighting the firecrackers and dropping them into the barrel, but the thought was so cruel and the idea of the destroyed flowers so sad that he couldn’t suggest the idea to Alonso. He looked at the old can Alonso had found and wondered if the metal was thin enough that the firecrackers would blow holes through it. You were meant to save empty cans, but this was rusted and already well beyond saving.

‘Good, he’s going through the trays,’ Alonso whispered over the noise of the metal trays sliding from their racks before being hastily stacked. ‘I think he’s alone. He’ll be in the front for a while.’

Ramón looked at Alonso and handed him the can, taking care that the long end of the fuse was sticking out.

There were only four matches left in the book, and Alonso made short work of breaking the first two. ‘They’re bad matches,’ he said, wiping his nose on the back of his hand, trying to seem unbothered. He was about to shakily set them on the ground when Ramón snatched them up.

‘I’ll light it,’ he said. ‘Check and see that he’s still in the front.’ He began running a match along the worn sandpapery strip.

Alonso crawled closer to the open doorway, all but pressing his face onto the pavement in an effort to remain low and peeked around the frame. ‘Ok, he’s not looking. Hurry! Do it now,’ he whispered.

Ramón lit the match and held it to the fuse. ‘Oh my God.’

‘What are you *doing*?’ Ramón looked up and saw his little sister standing over

them. Marianita's hands were on her hips, and her eyebrows were knitted in a perfect imitation of Mamá's look of angry incredulity. 'Are you spying on el—'

'Shut up!' Alonso hissed. 'Get down, he's going to see you.'

Marianita crouched beside them and glanced back and forth on the street.

Ramón dropped the match when it burned down to his fingers. 'Shit.' The fuse remained unlit.

Marianita's eyes widened as she leaned around the barrel to see what her brother was doing. 'You're—!'

'You have a choice right now to be the best person or the worst person,' Alonso said. 'It's just for fun, don't ruin it.'

'What do I get if I don't?'

The boys sighed. 'What do you want?'

After negotiating use of the football, Ramón took the last match and managed to light it after only one strike against the exhausted matchbook. He held it to the fuse, and the three of them gasped when it sparked to life and the light traveled down the fuse. Ramón reached across Alonso and rolled it through the doorframe. They turned and stood on tiptoe to watch through the window above the flowers.

'How does the fire know which way to go?' Marianita asked, and not in a whisper.

'Shh.'

El Ruso was in the process of turning to place an empty tray he pulled from the rack onto the front counter when the firecrackers went off in a series of brief but livid pings and pops. He had enough time to start and lift the edge of the tray slightly before his eyes zeroed in on the firecrackers, and the noise stopped. His eyes darted from the door to the window and the three ducked and ran.

'Don't think I didn't see you, Ramón! Uh, and you, too! Alfonso, whatever your name is! Son of a bitch!' he called through the door. 'Motín! Your son just blew something up in my shop!' he called across the street to Papá. And that, consequently, was how Ramón ended up spending the next days at home, taking on extra chores, and having to head straight upstairs after helping at the church with Mamá to watch over Papá and listen to him rant about this and that until Mamá needed him to run an

errand.

Lately Papá was enjoying the retelling of the story of how the family, hundreds of years previously, played an instrumental role in igniting the Esquilache Riots against Charles III, having been bakers themselves and part of an increasingly widening underclass, unable to afford the materials necessary for their craft. 'Up they marched, up! All the way to Madrid!' Ramón's father said, gesturing in his wild way, almost dancing, nearly knocking over the chair he had propped up on a stool so he could recane it while seated. On some days, his energy returned to him and he became a story-telling dervish.

'Calm yourself,' Mamá said, then touched his hair where it curled at the nape of his neck. His bursts of energy worried her more than his tired days.

Papá steadied the chair, and went on. 'In their capes they marched like heroes, they nearly died doing it, but they inspired many. They were there —mark me! — they were there on Palm Sunday. They were there in their capes. This is how we earned our name.' His eyes darkened and he looked into the distance as though he, too, had been there at the violent start.

Ramón, having been told this story since before he was alive (Mamá told him Papá wasted no time in educating his children, dictating many stories to his wife's pregnant belly in the months that preceded their births), was only half listening, and trying to decide what to do with the little beetle that was slowly making its way along the floor to him.

'Someone cursed this family back then, at that riot. The duke or the king himself, it must have been. Who else could have been so angry? I think probably it was the duke, because he was very embarrassed. We attacked him in the street —'

'You weren't there,' Mamá said. 'It was nearly two hundred years ago. *You* weren't there.'

'*We*, my family, *we*!' He placed his hand over his heart and gave Ramón a long-suffering look. 'Obviously, I hadn't been born yet in the physical sense, but I was there in spirit. As I was saying, we attacked him in the street and pinned the list of the people's demands to his shirt before sending him off to the king like a naughty schoolboy. And then the king admonished him for taking orders from the lay people.'

Ha! No one ever liked a king.'

His mother leaned over and pinched his father on the arm.

'Ay, what! It's a history lesson, it's history. I don't mean today. —What's more, he was the *thirteenth* duke of Medinaceli, and from the beginning of time everyone knows thirteen is an evil number—ow!'

'Stop filling his head with nonsense. What kind of a man tells his children they're—' she covered Marianita's ears and mouthed the word *curse*. 'If I ever heard something more absurd, I don't know what it is. No more of that talk.'

'I'm only saying what with the trouble in the church now, it's more than likely —'

Ramón saw his mother give his father a terrible look.

'*Alright,*' he put up his hands. 'Alright.'

Mamá decided to take Marianita with her to drop off some food at the church, turning her back on Papá's warnings if she kept up this many visits to her brother people would think she was part of the female faction of the Falange.

Except for Papá and maybe el Ruso, most adults thought children didn't listen much. But Ramón knew the word Falange. Papá taught him the meaning, 'phalanx,' using blocks to demonstrate the rectangular format militaries would use to intimidate, show organization. He knew the black and red flag, its five arrows spread like fingers, with the yoke across the center to make sure they would hit their targets. He knew from Papá that they were bad people. ('No one trustworthy uses a weapon to represent himself.') But he'd never seen anyone like that. They were an unknown, a dark thought late at night.

The main thing that word signaled to Ramón was that Mamá was almost certain to stay for dinner with Tío, taking her time coming home to prove that none of the people who actually ran things at the church were in league with ignorant people intent on ruining the country. 'Instead of shattering people's self esteem when you disagree, you could try talking to them,' she said. 'Name-calling isn't going to talk sense into them.'

'My love, you *cannot* talk sense into them, they are insensible!'

'Insensible!' Marianita called as she and Mamá made their way down the stairs,

quietly closing the door behind them.

‘Why doesn’t Marianita ever get in trouble?’

‘Because you hog all the trouble for yourself,’ Papá said, then leaned in conspiratorially and whispered, ‘You’ll live to see a riot like that. It’s coming. I have a nose for these things. The people in charge,’ leaning back in his chair took an effort, but he returned to his repair work. ‘Blind. Too many of them blind to what’s coming. The nationalists in the military — also idiots — don’t respect them. And organized idiots are dangerous idiots. Trouble,’ when he raised his ringer to make a point, his hand shook a little. He muttered to himself, using words like folly and hubris as he tied a loose strand of the chair caning. He turned to Ramón, about to say more, but thought better of it.

Ramón thought of his mother mouthing the word *cursed*, and felt a cold animal that lived unconsidered and dormant inside of him turn over uneasily in its sleep.

Sometimes, after a good rant about signage or riots, his energy went—that’s how Papá put it, whoosh, it went, like his energy could stand up and leave the room at will, Ramón helped him into bed, handed him his book, and snuck out for some air. Mamá could hardly begrudge him that, and was more likely to never know.

Heading in the opposite direction from the center of town where he could be caught, he stuck to side roads heading in the direction of the river. He walked silently past the shadowy entrance of the tapered alleyway that led from the winding Calle Irlandés to nowhere, to the old brick wall behind the laundress, the same one he and Alonso rejected the idea of frightening the horde of feral cats that lived in old wooden crates before realizing people were back there. He spun around and saw it was el Ruso and a man with a five-pointed insignia on his arm in heated conversation.

Ramón flattened himself against the wall, amazed at his luck that he hadn’t been seen. It was the part of summer that stretched twilight for hours after sunset, and although the purple night threw long shadows, out in the open, he wouldn’t be hard to see. It would be too risky to try to sneak past the entrance again. He tried to think of another way to double-back.

It couldn’t have been the Falange insignia. Ramón crouched down, and snuck another peek around the corner.

The look on el Ruso's face alone would have been enough to keep Ramón from allowing himself to be seen, even without his strong wish to keep clear of the man for several days. His expression, which could be stern-looking even in a fair mood, was frightening in its intensity. He spoke quickly and kept his voice low.

The other man, whose face Ramón could not fully see, said something sharp and made a quick gesture toward el Ruso, who caught him by the arm and seemed to bring the man forward towards himself. Just as quickly, el Ruso's hands were at the man's throat, forcing him backwards against the brick wall.

Terrified, Ramón backed away and stood up. He tried to listen. There was the frantic beating of his own heart in his ears, a pitiful wind whispering as it always did through the rust-eaten gutters overhead. The unmistakable sound of a struggle. Fighting. Then a roar of anger, a dull thud. Silence.

Terrified, Ramón turned and ran as fast as he could. Someone shouted 'Hey!' but didn't dare turn around.

When Ramón burst through the door, Mamá was already home. She angrily informed him he would be working every day after school to help the poor baker he had terrorized with his thoughtless and dangerous prank.

'Mamá! Listen!'

'You will do this starting Monday until the priest tells you at Confession that God has forgiven you for nearly burning down that poor man's livelihood and shaming your parents. And your tío knows all about it, so I wouldn't expect a quick penance.' She would not hear his story about the fight.

The next day was Sunday, but Mamá said they didn't have to go to mass, and should stay home with Papá instead. He had finished the chair sometime in the night and, to Mamá's horror, somehow made it down the stairs and into the taberna to prepare for the week like he used to. Ramón nervously awaited any word about the murder, but there was no news.

El Ruso had strangled one of the Falange, he was sure of it. Maybe that was why mass was cancelled. From the window in his parents' bedroom, he kept an even more careful eye to see if el Ruso would behave differently. But he did nothing more than what he always did: hose the street down in the morning, drink with Papá on the

steps in the afternoon, and sweep at the end of the day.

HAIDEILIA
OCTOBER, 2022

A very tall, bloodless-looking man gestures for me follow him through a wooden gate into open the office area of the university library, which is an academic bullpen of low-walled cubicles beneath the big, ornate ceiling. ‘History?’ he asks as we navigate around the cubicles, most of which are empty. ‘History MA?’ There are dark purple lines under his eyes and I feel a strange pity for him.

What if it’s just that you spend your youth mentally preparing for some enormity — tests of mettle — and then it’s over quick or doesn’t happen at all and the thing that yawns before you is a calm sea? You could still drown in that.

This is why it’s worth looking for Ramón. If the unlikely happens and we find him, we advance scholarship, honor a memory, raise the dead. If we don’t try... that’s just doing what anyone else would do.

‘Nah, film major, sliding into the MFA next term if I’m lucky.’ I’ve gotten better at saying this without an apologetic shrug. ‘But this actually is just a... a side project.’

He ignores that bit. ‘Major? Don’t see many film majors. We don’t see many undergrads at all back here.’ He looks at me almost suspiciously as he stops in front of a cubicle.

The woman inside stands up so quickly her chair rockets backward into the flimsy cubicle wall with a bang, causing all three of us to flinch and a disembodied voice to whisper *Jesus*.

‘Sorry,’ she whispers through a wince.

The man smiles at her kindly and gives her one slow blink. ‘Your 1pm.’ Turning to me, he says ‘Good luck,’ and stalks off.

The librarian is much younger than I thought she’d be. Her sweet, chubby face is framed by short bangs and a nervous upside down smile that makes her look sheepish before she even says anything. ‘Hi, Hi-dee-lia Avery. Am I saying that right, Hai-dee-lia? Haideilia?’

‘Hi, last one, Haideilia. You must be—’

‘Ann Kim,’ she holds out her hand and curtsies a little when I shake it. ‘Just Ann.’ She nods her head like she’s agreeing with something I just said and does the upside down smile again.

‘Okay. Um, it’s nice to meet you.’

‘Likewise! Uh, so —’ she gestures to the chair next to her desk as she retrieves hers. ‘Hai-deilia, I did some preliminary work to start helping you map out what’s possible to know.’

At her request, I explain what the research is and flub a bit about why I’m doing it. Background work for a film project, a documentary my friend and I are making about his father and this scholarship.

In turn, Ann explains that she wasn’t able to find out definitively who Ramón might have been ‘but then again if I’d been able to locate him, it wouldn’t have been much of a research project,’ and explained instead that it might be useful to learn more about where he might have come from in Spain, and possibly ‘witnessed’ as a child.

Ann pauses suddenly so I take the file she put together and look at the reference sheet she’s assembled. Of course, it makes sense to at least try to understand what we can of his past even if we never find the man himself, see what matches up between the letters and history. Not that he seemed to talk about Spain all that much. It’s the nearest thing I could think of chasing up.

‘Witnessed isn’t the right word, I suppose,’ Ann says. ‘Witness is too passive. This is something he experienced, something he lived through. Observed, yes, to a degree, but lived through.’

‘Is bearing witness passive?’

‘Yeah, I’m not sure I agree with me, either.’ Upside down smile. ‘But I think you know what I mean.’

She points to what we know, which isn’t much. But the Civil War in Spain is fairly well-documented, and photographed, and still a polarizing topic. She points to something interesting, an incongruity: ‘The children who were evacuated to Britain were sent from the north of Spain. They were Basque. But based on what you shared,

Ramón appears to be from the south of the country. ‘I don’t think it would have been easy to cross the country, essentially, to be evacuated. You’d almost need an armored guard.’

Explains in a way not meant to be condescending that getting first-person perspectives on that war would be difficult now, close to 90 years on, should we want to add color to what things were like then. It would be easy to tell her about Dolly, about how it wouldn’t actually be difficult at all to show how the end of the war wasn’t the end of the war, but I hold off. I can’t talk to Dolly about this. Even if she were alive, who am I to ask her to relive her reasons for leaving? Mythology is right to warn about looking back.

‘Anyway, on the third page here,’ she reaches across and moves the papers for me, ‘There’s a good list of references you could start with to understand specifically what was happening with the Catholic church at that time, since your subject mentioned his family harbored a priest in the middle of the violence against clergymen.’ She nods to herself again. ‘It’s possible there are records to scan there, maybe even through the Catholic church, of people who took on extreme risks like this — well, I’m assuming it’s an extreme risk. It certainly sounds like it was.’

I confess I hadn’t thought of most of these things. The dread again that I’m the wrong person to tell even a story that I am in. Miscast, as usual.

When I thank Ann, she puts four books on hold for me, hands me her card, even though we have each other’s email addresses. She tells me to let her know if there’s anything else she might be able to help me with. ‘I’d love to know where you net out,’ she says.

Net out. Sounds like a Jane term. Or something a business person would say.

I kill time until I have to walk over to Burroughs’s ‘check in’ on my catch-up work from last term, and my MFA application progress, bodying up the portfolio, and I think making sure I’m okay in a subtle enough way that it doesn’t bother me, even though the idea of going back conjures the last time last time I was there. He told me

he also had a mother ‘like that’ and knew a good therapist through the service on campus, Sami. ‘She’s a real one. None of that camp counselor bullshit.’ Jane had been there. It felt like an intervention.

The first time I met him is a happier memory, and a scene I’ve tried and failed to block and script many times. Jane wanted to introduce us and we found him standing perilously on a swivel chair at the front of an empty lecture hall, reaching for the handle of what was meant to be a remote-operated projector screen. Even pre-pandemic, half of them were broken or unpredictable. Now they all are, lending unintended comic relief as they extend or retract of their own volition halfway through lectures.

Burroughs heard us — Jane and me — and turned his head slightly toward the door but couldn’t turn around fully in the chair.

‘Oh no, for this, one calls IT,’ Jane said, removing her mask. Queens accent is so thick, it sounds like a parody.

‘If I die,’ he said, ignoring her and stretching onto tiptoe to jam his fingers into the metal casing to try to pull the retracted screen free, ‘I would like to be buried in Germany. Not France, like everyone else.’ The screen gave way, and he stepped down, pulling it into place as he went.

‘Noted.’ Jane didn’t ask what his words meant, so I guess she knew. Her tone wasn’t unaffectionate, but there was a slight weariness in her that told me most students had this reaction to his eccentricities. She’d pursed her lips and shrugged at me. *He’s weird, but he’s ours.*

She explained she was backlogged advising students who were resuming their studies, but as I’d be taking his seminar that term and since we were both from Detroit and have a similar temperament (‘Uh oh,’ he’d said), she was hoping he would be able to take me on. He did.

‘First time living in New York?’ he asked, gesturing toward the windows, the wider world.

‘No, well, yes. I mean, I was here, didn’t go home. Last term, when we locked down,’ I confessed, sounding like an idiot and hoping he’d be uncaring or wise enough not to ask why, ‘I stayed in New York but I haven’t really seen much.’

Burroughs didn't react with surprise or judgement. Instead, he pulled a mask out of his pocket, put it on, and said 'Well, welcome back to the monkey house.'

He answers the buzz of the intercom with the predictable 'It's open, be a minute,' so I do the same ritual as the last three times: climb the two flights of stairs, let myself in, and throw all my shit on the floor, because every conceivable surface is covered in the detritus of filmmaking and academic life —books and scripts that if I were nervier I'd rifle through — and sit in the same chair in front of the same coffee table.

All of Burroughs's furniture seems to be dented and chipped and distressed in that lovely way that only comes after years of use and comfortable neglect. What else can a coffee table mean but home? He has a large book of photographs of Detroit. Unlike all the other oversized coffee table books about Detroit, the images are not in black and white, and they are not focused on poverty and faded glory and brokenness. Unlike all other coffee table books, this one isn't for show. It's been read many times.

What little novelty there may have been in being from there wore off by the end of the first semester of freshman year. I learned quickly that everyone is fucked up. Most of them in better, more exotic ways than me. Most of them more willing to talk about it. But in fairness, it does seem a primary output of pursuing a degree in the arts seems to be to work out what happened to you. Or is happening.

I pull a pre-roll out of my pocket and light it, half to see what he does, and half because I could use it. Since missing half a year and coming back, these advisory check-ins have become more frequent. Burroughs mainly on the academic side, Jane mainly because she got me the gig at the art gallery. Technically, I think she's my boss. Either way, it's weird to be worried about by people like this. Professors, bosses. Most don't have enough heart to really see you.

'Found it,' Burroughs breezes in, holding out the copy of *Notes on the Cinematographer*, the book he'd promised to lend. It's old, yellowed from nicotine maybe, and age, with a bright orange spine. 'It's a good smattering of tips. Highly skimmable.'

I hand him the joint.

If he knows he's being tested, he doesn't show it. He sits down, takes a hit, holds it, lets go. Slowly, he hands it back to me.

This is the stronger one from Nikki, good when you're stressed, sinking to the bottom of the lungs and fog snaking around the trees. Bronchi.

'But don't over-index. Better to focus on the writing for now, for the end-of-term project.' He hesitates. He has more to say, but doesn't say it. Then, after a beat, decides to go for it anyway. 'So. how's your mom doing?' The directness is better, and though an academic, he doesn't ask in a weirdly meaningful, searching-for-a-red-flag kind of way that Jane sometimes does. More like the way a friend would, undercurrent of *I know I'm meant to ask but I don't really care how she's doing — are you ok.*

Though it is hard to shake the feeling he only probably only does things like this, smoking up with students, to hold on to his feeling of relative youth a little longer. Jane's the same way. Maybe it's a filmmaker thing, and someday I'll be like that.

He's waiting for an answer.

More-than-cursory detail helps demotivate people from asking too much. 'She's fine. I mean, she's never "ok", but.. Oh, and I guess the other thing I missed telling you is I guess a check from my grandmother's life insurance came through, so... she has added stability, should things fall apart again.' I can say that for her, at least. Never had a lot but never had a problem with financial discipline. Drilled that one into us.

'And your brother...?'

'Yeah. Fine.' I bite the inside of my cheek. Nikki has pointed out I only do this when I'm annoyed. It's a useful tell, now that most of the time whatever I'm feeling gets out from under me, hides around the corner. 'It's always been easier for him.' It comes out with more resentment than I really have for it. 'He's eager to leave, obviously, but he's got another year of high school. Kind of splits time between her and Steve — our dad,' I clarify.

It isn't really anger that I feel —it's just that anger is simple. A primary color emotion.

‘Yeah, well. Younger brothers are like that,’ he says. ‘Tend to have it easier.’

‘I don’t hold it against him. Most of the time.’

His smile is knowing. We pass the joint again and he reaches over to a side table dominated by a dangerously high stack of loose papers and notebooks for a blue glass ashtray.

Now his phone rings. Not a mobile, a landline.

‘God, you haven’t seen Jane, have you? That call is for her.’

‘Not since yesterday. Who has a *landline*?’

‘You know, the nice thing about a landline is you don’t have to carry it around. Kind of working against me now, though.’

I gesture to him to go ahead, and he puts the ashtray down with a clunk on top of the Detroit photo book, and stalks into the kitchen to answer. It’s a cord phone, mounted to the wall. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘Mmm. Let me check,’ he spins around and starts rummaging through drawers that sound like they’re stuffed with papers.

Maybe people like me are just fodder for future projects of his, and this is some kind of vampirism. Not a hard connection to make, as he does it on purpose: wild silver hair, and a mostly black wardrobe ...oh, god, and the wayfarers. There has to be at least one professor who is a version of this at every university in the western world, and not one of them teaches economics or physics. It’s a personality type. Previously, I’d have assumed the only reason someone would have that look is to make himself easier for his students to romanticise. What’s odd about Burroughs, then, is he *doesn’t* appear to be interested in sleeping with any of his students. And I know this because people like Melanie Bartow float the theory he’s asexual, meaning he has spurned what I can only imagine were strong but banal advances, the kind you’d expect from a person with Melanie’s desperation and level of sexual vanity. She thinks part of being an artist is sleeping with a professor. —Also a personality type.

However, Burroughs is a filmmaker, and all filmmakers know something about acting. How to appear to be something else. Despite this, he seems at all times to really be this person sitting in front of me, which isn’t to say he would or wouldn’t fuck a student, but someone who does not violate whatever moral code it is he’s

accepted. Besides, projecting a persona implies a level of concern with how you're perceived that doesn't seem to line up with the person before me.

Either way, he's better than most of the assholes who tell you how to do things for a living. Dr. Terpanian, for example, keeps a framed daguerreotype of Dickinson on her desk and talks about her as if she knew her personally. Nikolaidis, who is only an adjunct, thinks he's better than everyone because he speaks four languages, which he goes so far out of his way to demonstrate, it gives me second-hand embarrassment. I can see him eating a microwave dinner alone, without even the comfort of background television noise. Just a silent, wood-paneled room, with possibly one stuffed and mounted animal on the table beside him—maybe a mongoose or a raven he has named for a Greek philosopher and partially stroked bald over the years—and his gelatinous macaroni. Wes Anderson shit. Which is lonelier: eating those dinners, or buying them?

Burroughs would never eat a microwave dinner.

He's pulled out a notebook and is scribbling something down. One of those people who can talk and write at the same time.

There is a burn mark on the coffee table, on the side where he was sitting. With a foot, I slide the book with the ash tray over it.

The buzzer for the front door makes me leap out of the couch.

'Could you get that, it's Jane,' he says.

The moment she's inside, Jane wastes no time at all throwing her coat on top of a stack of books like she lives there and admonishing Burroughs, who has wrapped up his call, for making me come down here instead of just meeting me when he goes uptown later today.

I'd forgotten she knew where I live.

'Ready for me?'

'Just a sec,' Burroughs says.

Jane nods to the phone and says 'Producer call.'

'You two are doing a project together?'

'Well, we're trying to.'

I should have been listening in.

Jane checks out the book on the coffee table, and asks if Detroit is really as bad as ‘they all’ make it out to be.

‘No. Not really.’ But to give her a thrill, I share the one act of vandalism I ever committed, which was to throw a rock through a window pane of a condemned warehouse near my high school to even out what was an otherwise imperfect checkerboard pattern of broken and unbroken glass. And it wasn’t even a real rock, it was a chunk of loosened asphalt that I picked up from the side of the street. That’s it.

Burroughs hands Jane the phone and nods with his eyes closed. ‘Eric, I’m delighted,’ she says, and paces into the kitchen.

‘Where was this?’ Burroughs asks, gesturing to the book. ‘The warehouse.’

He heard that? ‘Near Rivertown.’ I’m spacing out too much. I put out the joint and leave it in the ashtray. A gift.

In truth I do remember blackouts when I was a kid, but being a kid, the disruption was exciting. I knew my neighbors. And even before I left, months before the pandemic, bright-faced hipsters from California and Oregon were pouring in to take advantage of the cheap rent and tax breaks for shiny new start-ups. There won’t be a renaissance but at least our house will be worth something. Well, Ava’s house.

Now only memory is straightforward. It makes it harder to stay in the moment.

The background murmur of Jane’s call stops and she comes back in.

‘Congratulations?’ I ask, and they both say not yet.

‘What are your plans today?’ Jane asks, and I tell her that I’d been thinking of going to a museum, maybe. Leith had said he was going to the Met today, and I told him if the timing worked out, I’d go.

Her eyes widen in delight. ‘*He’s* lecturing at The Met,’ she jerks a thumb at Burroughs, who nods with all the enthusiasm of someone being reminded they have to work a 12-hour shift.

Jane rummages in her bag for her wallet and hands me a membership card. ‘Here, use this. Have fun. Take in some art. Get some inspiration for your midterm. Take it as a personal assignment, we can talk about it at work.’

‘Limit my inspiration to the Met?’

‘As an impromptu assignment, it hardly confines you.’

When my eyes find Burroughs’s, he already knows I’m not going to that lecture, and he’s fine with it. Okay then. I can take in art, I can have a finite meeting with Leith.

Anxious twinge in my stomach at the thought of leaving the calm and quiet of Burroughs’s apartment to head for one of the most famous museums in New York on a weekend. It will be packed with people. And I didn’t sleep well last night. Usually a bad combination. Hard to fathom, honestly, how pushing my way through crowds of people to look at art will do anything but stress me out. I’ll just be aware of how I look, when I’m looking at art.

‘And anyway, isn’t half of their stuff stolen? Isn’t that the case with 90% of museums?’

‘Dubious provenance,’ Burroughs nods, closing a notebook I hadn’t realized he was writing in. ‘I wouldn’t say *half* of it. Few eyebrow-raisers, though. Maybe you could write about that.’ He shrugs on his jacket, as if it’s decided we’ll head up together. I gather mine from the floor. I would have forgotten it but Nikki, who has now lived with me long enough to know I’m an idiot, flagged me down in the street just as I stepped into the street and tossed it to me. He continues, unaware of how adrift I still am. ‘As inspiration goes, I think you’ll have many a muse you don’t particularly like. That’s not important. It doesn’t matter so much if you particularly *like* the thing that inspires you. The point of the exercise is about being open to the connection, and then making it, telling the truth about it.’ He pauses. ‘I’m aware you also don’t like being told that your inspiration must be graded, too, but you are. Mid-terms. Them’s the breaks. Gotta start somewhere. Am I missing a platitude?’

He’s right, and he knows he’s right, so I don’t need to say anything. The glass ash tray has moved from its place on top of the Detroit book to beside it. The cover photo is a row of the old Victorian mansions in Brush Park.

Moving around clears my head a bit.

Burroughs opens the door and makes an “after you” gesture to Jane and me, checking his watch.

Only person in the world who can smoke up and still give a shit about the time.

On the walk from the 86th Street station, we pass people taking pictures of everything because that's the part of town this is. The rain Nikki knew was coming came and went quickly, so everything is colder, but brighter.

The tourist phenomenon impacted me the way I imagine it does all non-native New Yorkers. First, I had the camera, then started to see everyone else had a camera and saw what I saw, so I sort of stopped. And then, for a while, I was annoyed at everyone with a camera, snapping shots of homeless people and old graffiti like that's not at all completely fucking dehumanising and artless. Most of them are the kind of people who don't wear masks inside stores. I'm glad the thought never occurred to me to take photos of tourists taking photos. I'd've done it.

We cross the street and have to jump over a wide puddle that has formed in a sunken part of the pavement. A family with small children shuffles along at a funereal pace ahead of us, so Burroughs and I split up to move around them. As we do, I pass a little boy who carries a yellow foam sailboat. His dimpled hands move it up and down through the air with an exaggerated whooshing noise as the boat navigates the violent, invisible waves that rock New York. It makes my chest ache.

The doughy smell of soft pretzels heralds the nearness of the museum. Because of all the street vendors, the pigeons have descended en masse. Two old women toss pieces of a bun to them, and the whole thing threatens to become Hitchcock.

Caught in a rather large and loud cloud of people all wearing the same traffic cone orange t-shirt, we jaywalk across the street and the pigeons scatter in an eruption of coos. Burroughs pauses to buy a pretzel after a cursory time check reveals we made better time than he thought we would.

'I don't know how anyone can eat those pretzels.' Up close they smell burnt, stale, and buttery.

'If you hate that, just wait until they break out the roasted chestnuts.'

I stand several feet away from him, making sure I'm not downwind from the vendor, and watch the pigeons one by one make their way back to their stakeout. The old women have moved on, and the bread is long gone. It's funny to watch them scurry away when someone walks too near to them, only to sneak back to the same spot with the same boldness.

When Burroughs comes back, we continue down the row of vendors until the Museum is in sight.

Ava, who tried calling once already this morning, calls again. Incredible how just seeing her name on my phone screen can inspire such a huge wave of nausea, but that it could also be the pretzels. I don't need more anxiety this morning. At this point, no matter what's actually going on, all she's going to do at this point is scream at me for not picking up. So I send her to voicemail again.

From the corner of my eye, I notice a derelict-looking woman moving laboriously across the street toward an overflowing garbage bin. Over her shoulder is a rod full of pashminas, presumably for sale. They bounce gently against her back.

In just the few seconds that I watch, three more people walk past the bin and awkwardly attempt to jam even more trash into it without breaking stride, which twice results in a big show of pretending not to notice when a napkin or Starbucks cup falls onto the pavement. This does appear to be the woman's destination. A distracted frat-boy-looking asshole walks right into her while turning his head to yell something to his friends walking several paces behind him. He says 'Oh shit!' and turns to apologize, but upon seeing her appearance, seems to think better of it, like saying anything further will be taken as an invitation to peddle. His friends laugh. She ignores them and keeps moving, now crossing the street by the row of vendors.

Not even the pigeons move for her. That's what's odd!

She raises this pashmina holder and twin black bags clanking full of the empty bottles and cans she's been collecting and picks her way through the throng of birds with a strange tenderness. I feel Burroughs slow to a stop beside me and see what I see. We stare at her as she continues across the sea of birds like Christ moving over the water. None of those pigeons so much as flinch. It's so strange.

Burroughs takes a breath. ‘How gentle a person do you reckon you’d have to be for the most universally despised animals in the world to trust you?’

I manage to say ‘I don’t know.’

‘Pretty damn, I’d say.’

I swallow, but there is a sharp lump in my throat. ‘Yeah.’ Fortunately, Burroughs is too busy watching her to notice how close to tears I am. I don’t understand why I am so overwhelmed. Could blame the weed.

No one else seems to notice her. Rather, they do, but they are so focused on not noticing her that they don’t really see.

Burroughs again doesn’t give a professorial performance, no soliloquy about how artists and filmmakers are collectors of miracles. We just watch her until she makes her way to the bin and —oh, fuck— turn away when she leans down to rummage through it.

So now we face the Met. More accurately, the stairs to the Met. The building is imposing and beautiful, huge stone archway with enormous windows, Greek columns... but now it seems even more pretentious than before.

My phone buzzes again. Ava, third time. I accept, already regretting it. ‘Can I call you back? I’m in cla—’ but I am interrupted by the beeping sound of a dropped call. Or she hung up on me. ‘Alright.’ Equally likely. I switch the phone to do not disturb, try to let the new surroundings of the museum overwhelm the low hum of a creeping dread.

Burroughs spots a few people he knows, slouching beneath shoulder bags and squinting at the building and at their phones, and we make our way up the stairs. He’s careful to stand with them, apart from me, so no one thinks there’s anything going on. Then again, is there anything going on? Smoking up with two professors is definitely something going on, just not the something everyone else would think. Looking around, though, it seems unlikely anyone would notice much of anything right now. It’s still morning, and eyes still haven’t quickened out of the tired glaze that comes from the hypnotic rock and sway of their morning subway rides uptown.

The woman who seems to be the leader of the group of people waves her hands toward our group like she’s splashing at waist-deep water, and they dutifully

allow themselves — us with them — to be shunted up the steps and into the bright, palatial limestone and marble entrance.

It is comprised of a series of soaring archways and corinthian columns that support rows of balconies on either side. People who have made it up the stairs can look down and observe the chaos of so many people arriving and leaving or else peer down through the chaos down to the mosaic floor. The balcony railings are waist-high, with absolutely nothing standing in the way of someone who might want to jump, or the accidental drop of a phone or camera.

Everyone looks out of place. Like we're all severely underdressed for a building as formal and imposing and generally well cared for as this. Two men are in shorts and flip flops. Most aren't dressed like that, but still. Underdressed.

A group tour wrangler points out a specific and gargantuan color-riot of a flower arrangement and says something I can't hear. Meet-up spot, probably.

I go through the ticket line on Jane's membership card and circle back around to the group even though I'm not really with them, putting on my stupid admission sticker and feeling like a child. Apparently they have time to explore the museum before the lectures, plural, I've learned, begin. Rush of guilt for being so selfish as to forget to ask Burroughs what he's here to talk about.

'Go uncover something great in the next hour. When we meet up, I'd love if we should discuss something we've discovered.' It's already clear the wrangler will not hold the group to that, which is fortunate as they seem to recognize it's incredibly patronizing. She starts handing out Museum maps with red visitor stickers everyone in the group has to wear, different from the one I have. She smiles at me and offers me a map.

Superstitiously, I do not take one. Maybe I'll find a painting of a pigeon somewhere. Picasso's father painted them. Southern Spain. Málaga. He recognized an accidental beauty in their dove-shaped bodies, their shining purple and green necks, the gradient shift from amber to gold in their irises.

The woman is still talking, but I'm toward the back of the group and it's hard to hear her, and I probably shouldn't be trying anyway. Judging by the look on

everyone's faces, most of which are turned to study the map handout or back to phone screens, it's nothing important.

'Hey bored kid,' someone says directly into my ear, and I nearly jump out of my skin. Leith is not smirking but smiling and my heart pitches forward, toward him, in spite of me. Even the nickname he has given to my wandering mind elicits a rush of affection, even though I should hate it.

'Hey. I'm a little stoned.'

He is only mildly surprised. There it is again. An honest face, even with half of it obscured by a mask, no guesswork. 'Well this'll be fun.'

Someone like him would have dissolved slowly and painfully in my high school, a slug in salt. If you weren't angry, you had to pretend to be. Leith could never do it. Too much character.

But when I'm close enough to him, I can feel a kind of darkness. Shadows that lengthen and contract, flicker of something. Vulnerability and goodness may shimmer around him but it's more complicated than that. I've always wanted to know what it is. At times I can feel around it. In bed, on the one night I'd stayed over — a risk, a thrill — inside the quiet minutes when neither one of us was asleep, I could sense it in his breathing or the way he turned away, find its edges for moment, an outline of something moving in the dark.

I used to think it was the guilt, and that's part of it but not the core of it. It makes me want to shock him, to look him square in the eye and make him gasp. To hurt him back somehow. If I lean in, why can't you lean in?

Instead I find myself saying 'Jane said if I see nothing else, make it the Temple of Dendur. Would you like to hang out in Egypt, several thousand years ago?'

'Can we make a pit stop in modernist Spain?'

Up the main staircase, most of the galleries are connected by a series of identical entrances and exits, engineered in such a way that while standing in one gallery, it is possible to see beyond into others. The museum baits you forward. There's a design term for this. It's the kind of thing Ava would know.

Away from most of the crowds below, the dread creeps back up and I think of checking my phone again, but what good would it do?

This area is apparently all European art, which is clear from the first painting I lay eyes on: several misshapen oranges spilling from an overturned bowl onto a table shadowed in purples, greens, and blues. On one corner of the table is a grayish piece of paper with no writing, just more shadow play with the creases on the page. Little attention is paid to the angle of the table, or the way the oranges are falling. The focus is color and shadow. Artists from other continents can't pull shit like that and get away with it. You have to be from Europe, and you have to have done it in the last century. As Jane so often says when we watch a brilliant film, 'you can't say it that way anymore.' But I think John Ashbury said that first.

Jane has spoken a lot about unreality, and how even those 'cinematic' moments we experience feel less real to us precisely because when we recognize them as cinematic, we're no longer fully in them. This has ruined many films for me.

But weirdly, she made that comment after telling us a story about how she found a torn piece of envelope on the floor of a public restroom that had the words "I love you" written on it three times. Apparently finding a torn love note in a bathroom is a cinematic moment for Jane. Or maybe saying it three times means too much to be anything but engineered.

That's kind of like these violet-shadowed oranges. 20th Century European painters seem overly eager to point out that when you really look at a shadow, eventually you'll see its full of color, so when you paint with purple and blue shadows, you're showing what it really is. It's just that real isn't real enough.

Earlier, I did a lot of filming in black and white, but it didn't express the feeling I wanted. It looked contrived. The real storytelling is always in color and light. Painters seem to understand this innately. It's about *how* they make you see it.

There is much more space in the next room, in front of a reclining nude painting of a rather orangish-looking woman with thick eyebrows. Her lips are painted hooker red. There is a purplish shadow under her, too. She is unshaven and the black hairs under the arm she has raised to support her head resemble a spider. Her dark

eyes look out, right through the canvas, with an expression like she's about to dare you to say what you just said again.

Few people seem to look her in the eye—even Leith drifts away—which is why there's so much space around her. Most of them avert their gazes, not embarrassed for the vulgarity of her appearance and not necessarily embarrassed even to be caught looking at her dark tangle of pubic hair, but embarrassed *by* her. They are embarrassed by her ferocity, her who-asked-you stare, and they walk past her with as much grace as a creaking floor will allow a person to have.

Really saying something, to be able to embarrass a grown man wearing flip flops in public in October. Would he do the same thing with those hairless, ethereal pearls of the Renaissance, those soft Botticelli muses? Is nudity more ok if it's a hairless blonde Venus, and she's not looking at you? Why do we have to always sexualize nudity, anyway?

Before everything that happened with Ava last year, whenever I was naked in front of someone, I tried to summon the same kind of courage her war-face implies. I get it. The feeling is so familiar, so recognizable. Instead I probably looked scared and inexperienced. Even at my bravest, I probably couldn't even fake that kind of nerve.

But still, with Leith. There is a always a *flicker*. Like hearing a few bars of music from the open window of a passing car, the melody sweet and reassuring, something I'd want to experience in full, live, if only I knew how to identify it, how to find it again.

The lips of the woman's vagina are brazenly pink. Hot pink. That's a bit much. But looking back at her face, her mouth is slightly open, though not in a suggestive way. Yes, it's the breath she takes right before she tells you off.

I like her.

Leith sidles up again. 'I don't think we'll find any echoes of Ramón in here,' he says.

'Mm.'

—

The Temple of Dendur is not a tomb, as I assumed. It is a full *temple*, transported somehow from Egypt all the way here, but on the condition that it remain visible at all times. According to the giant sign, the challenge for the museum in accepting the temple was satisfying the condition that it remain visible at all times despite the fact that the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not open at all times.

And that is why, the sign goes on to explain, there is a slanted, two-story wall of windows that reveals a beautiful view of Central Park, resplendent and verdant and especially tempting on what has turned out to be a nice autumn day like today. At night, this room is lit from within with the sort of golden, amber lights you'd expect of an Egyptian temple after dark. Again the importance of light in creating authentic atmosphere, intimating braziers, torches, making it plainly visible to anyone through the giant glass wall, even after hours. Provided you're crazy enough to be in Central Park at night, that is.

The temple itself is grand, with a columned entryway that stands behind a shallow reflecting pool. There is a special kind of quiet around it. There are clear, vivid hieroglyphics and depictions of Osiris, Isis, and other gods and goddesses that go well beyond my ability to recognize. Also 19th Century graffiti: People who chiseled their names and the year they visited right into the stone walls, though careful to not debase the sacred space with curse words or weird messages. Just normal 19th Century tagging.

Then again, since apparently a Roman emperor — Augustus, maybe — had commissioned the temple, maybe to curry favor with a country he annexed, perhaps it's just another layer of audacity.

I spot Leith before he sees me. He sits on the stone steps leading up to the temple, but faces Central Park. He's seen enough of Roman Egypt, I guess. Maybe he wants reactions from park dwellers, though nobody seems to be peering in. Maybe all they can see this time of day is the park reflected back at them. His usual hardbound black notebook is open in his lap, the glasses are back on, and he writes only a few words at a time between glances out at the park. Poetry? When he writes, he hunches low over the notebook like he can't get close enough to the words.

How cool would it be to be visiting Central Park for the first time, having no idea this was here, and then just happening upon it? What would that do to a person's world view? I think I would feel connected to a rare and human beauty in the greater world, but I can see how someone might feel unanchored and disoriented, making a discovery like that, particularly at night, when you're not supposed to be there. What a shock to be stalking through the clipped grass on the north side, climbing over that joke of a metal split-rail fence — someone tall enough could practically step over it — and crossing the asphalt pathway and more lawn just to see the light pouring forth from the building to the right of the darkened corinthian columns of the closed Museum, a temple in its own right, illuminated. And then seeing this millennia-old temple, halogen-lit like it's still alive to Isis worship. Brilliant.

'I feel like, if that demand about making it visible at all times hadn't been made, this would have ended up on a lower level, you know, in a basement or something. That's what usually happens with the really ancient works. Keeping it up here is probably getting it more exposure than what the people who built it ever thought possible.' He pauses. 'And for reasons they never thought possible.' He smiles sympathetically at the thought of the creators of the temple learning not only that it survived so long, but it crossed an ocean to be worshiped for the ingenuity of its design, not the goddess or the emperor it was meant to please. The temple outlived its gods.

The thought of it winding up in a basement somewhere is crushingly sad.

'Did you notice people hold their own necks, like this?' He grips his neck. 'That reclining nude you were you looking at earlier, this lady came up at one point, like she was trying to do what you were doing, but she kind of only looked at it over your shoulder and she did that.'

'She hid behind me?'

A grin. 'Yeah, haven't you ever sort of done that in a museum? When you're up front, it's like it's looking back at you. I think it helps some people feel safer. You can confront so much in here, you know?'

'Yes.'

Should I tell him? Would he understand?

Instead he tells me. 'My dad loved coming here. I *hated* it as a kid. He would go so slowly through gallery, after gallery. My mom is the same way. He had this,' he spreads his hands apart, 'endless space for whatever was in front of him. Interested in everything. Curious about everything. Could make a connection with anything. I was restless as a kid, so I ducked out on him when I could. He talked to me about politics like I was an adult, about class systems. I used to think all parents were like that.'

'Political?'

'Present. Just intensely present. It kind of shifted when he got sick. Couldn't go anywhere, so just took to sort of holding court, even when he really didn't have the energy for it. He was always a bit of a performer.' He stops like he's said too much.

'I'm sorry I missed meeting him.'

'He'd've liked you.'

That *means* too much so I change the subject. 'How's the project, by the way?'

He blanches. The little rise of color recedes as quickly as it came. 'What?'

I nod, and a door in him that been closed until now opens a crack.

'Any luck with the elusive Ramón?'

A man trips over his sandals —what the hell is it with these people?— on the stairs. He manages to recover and avoid falling by taking two long, fast strides, duck-like and awkward, the flip flops smacking his heels. We both have to look away to keep from laughing, and he's spared answering.

On our way out of the museum, Leith is suddenly very interested in his phone. Ice water. It's Rachel, of course, it always is. He'd mentioned once she was uncomfortable with our 'friendship,' that had been the word used, and it was understandable, but not something I needed to hear. It makes me torture myself, to wonder if she knows. Deep down she must. It made me wonder if she is mature enough to blame me or blame him. I'm sure it would be easier to hate me, flatten me into something two-dimensional, no past, no layers, no feelings. Just a malignant force.

I should feel worse about it. Most of the time I hope she has someone else, too. Most of the time I compartmentalize him.

His phone buzzes, and he answers before a single ring is through, turning away from me. Of course.

A hand claps me on the back. It's Burroughs. 'All good?' he asks, pulling his mask off.

'Yep,' my voice is way too high-pitched, like an anime character. 'Thanks again for the book.'

He pats my shoulder a little roughly. Attagirl. Then the sunglasses reappear, slick as you please, and he pulls a cigarette and lighter out of his pocket as he follows us out. 'It's exactly what it looks like,' he says, putting the cigarette into his mouth, clocking that I watched him take his mask off to smoke. 'I'm on in ten, leave me in peace. Go home. Go write. I'll tell him,' he looks over at Leith, who has a hand covering one ear so he can hear better.

So I go.

5.

RAMÓN

JULY, 1936

On the first morning of penance to El Ruso, it occurred to Ramón to ask his father why he needed the rope. The question came from real curiosity and a need to limit the amount of time he'd have to spend with a murderer. He knew there was an answer to the question of Papá's strange weaknesses, an answer more real than 'When you get to be as old as your papá, sometimes you wake up before your body does,' and he also knew in a far off, dreamlike way that understanding would bring him pain. So instead he asked Papá what it felt like to have his strength return to his limbs when his body finally woke up.

Papá by then was sitting up and was playing with his grip on the rope in the way he always did before he'd tighten up, purse his lips, and pull himself groaning to a sitting position, with his feet on the floor. He stopped flexing his fingers and looked at Ramón with a twinkle in his eye that reminded Ramón of old people: a look that hinted at something playful and something terribly sad. 'Do you remember when you were learning to swim and you had to retrieve the stone I threw into the water? Remember how light it felt outside of the water compared to how heavy it felt at the bottom of the swimming hole, that same stone? —When my strength comes back, it's like pushing a heavy stone out of the water, holding it over my head, pushing pushing against all that weight and then—' he stood with a grunt '—*Pin-pan-pum!* Light as air.' He puffed out his chest and rapped his knuckles against it. He coughed a moment and sniffled.

Ramón was reminded of an aging lion roaring and felt a deep sadness drape itself over his shoulders. Papá wasn't *old*, exactly. His hair was still mostly black. And his parents explained that everyone ages differently; what happens to Papá or Mamá didn't have to happen to him. Ramón decided that in the end he would likely choose to just stay young. It seemed easier.

Recalling his more immediate troubles, Ramón considered another tactic. A hero to himself, he had decided not to tell his parents he had seen El Ruso kill a man

because he knew from a book about a spy, if they didn't know anything, El Ruso would have no reason to go after them. But perhaps if they were to come over to check on Ramón, or to help him help El Ruso, then he, Ramón, also wouldn't be killed. El Ruso was crazy, but surely not crazy enough to try to take out three people at once, especially just one day after killing someone already.

'It's nice when people are there to help us,' Ramón said, 'when our stone is a little too heavy.'

His father regarded him. 'That's a lovely thing to say, my little boy. Yes, it is very nice.'

'It's part of what is so good about having a family. There are more people who can help you.'

'Yes. Family will carry what you cannot.' He sighed.

'But what if you have no family?'

'Everyone has a family, one way or another.'

Ramón saw his opportunity and pounced. 'Not El Ruso.'

'He has many friends who look out for him. People like us. How many holidays has he spent in this house? —More than you,' he smiled. 'We are his family.'

'Then maybe we could all help him.'

'Ooh, I see, you little imp!' Papá abandoned buttoning his shirt to reach out with one arm, grab Ramón about the waist, and begin to tickle him, losing his balance in the process and knocking them both onto the bed all the while grinning and continuing to mutter 'Trickster! Little hyena!'

Ramón, giggling, easily escaped and rose to his feet. 'But not wrong.'

'Ah, look at all my good progress you've undone,' Papá said, hauling himself laboriously back to a sitting position and then to his feet again without the help of the rope, although Ramón sensed the effort had cost Papá and had been for his —Ramón's — benefit. 'Yes, Mamá and I help El Ruso all the time. You know that. And he helps us. But today — *today* is your day. Yours alone. No one else can do your penance for you. But now you know it's worth something, your help. He really could use it.' He turned to face the mirror hung over the dresser and resumed buttoning his shirt. His

hands shook with the effort, but his face was patient. 'He never asks for help, you know,' he said, glancing at his son's reflection. 'Never.'

'But if he never asks, why does he need it? If you really need help, you ask!' Ramón could hear his voice rising in pitch, he knew he was verging on whinging: something Papá would never abide.

'Pride keeps him from asking. He doesn't want to burden others.' Papá's tone was somber. 'Sometimes, you just know well enough to help, and you don't make a person ask.'

Ramón thought about this conversation alongside the terror that he felt walking across the hot street to the bakery as if to the gallows, but the memory of earlier that morning when his father weakly reached over his own head to untie one end of the rope from its mounted position on the bed-frame, the twine creaking noises of the rope, and the sound of Papá's composed breathing as he tried to convince his weakened, numb fingers to return to dexterity. These small sounds were loud in his ears, almost deafening. They were louder than the pots and pans clanking in the kitchen against the cheerful drone of his little sister's voice as she told Mamá about a dream she had the night before, or Mamá's instructions to come straight home afterward.

It was not much cooler inside than outside. The barrel flowers turned to face Ramón, but didn't know what to say. Flour particles swirled in the newly-disturbed air, which was heavy with the comforting scent of freshly baked bread. The particles drifted upward toward the high ceiling in a little tornado. Ramón held his breath and approached the counter. Peering around it, he could see the door to the back room was open, but no one was visible. —Had El Ruso forgotten, or was it an ambush?

The register that was normally on the counter was not there, though the two display windows still had loaves, tortas... Ramón turned around. The three tables and their chairs meant for customers who wanted to stay or had to wait were stacked neatly and lined up against the wall by the door. No possibility of someone hiding under them. Not that El Ruso was able to hide, Ramón thought. He was too big. But what was the reason for creating all the extra space? Ramón's imagination suggested it was to keep his own blood from getting all over everything, and the idea caused a

sick, swooping sensation in his stomach that reminded him of when Papá held him as a small child and tossed him into the air, pretending to drop him in an attempt to make him laugh. Despite the heat, he shivered, and felt cold all over.

Seized suddenly with the idea that if he tiptoed out of the bakery, he would be able to kill some time at the plaza or even at the church, yes, that was a better idea, penitent, and tell Mamá that he had been to see El Ruso but no one had been in. Ramón looked again toward the back room and took a silent, measured step backward toward the door, preparing to bolt.

A metallic clanging noise from behind him made him yell.

‘Watch your head, boy,’ El Ruso said, ducking his own head a little as he passed through the doorway from outside, straining with the effort of holding an enormous metal rack that Ramón recognised as one of the industrial shelving units El Ruso kept in the back. He passed Ramón, who had jumped aside, and with a growl, he righted the huge rack and leaned against it a moment, one hand on his lower back. Even slouching, he was extremely tall.

‘You’re late,’ he said. ‘You missed your co-conspirator, Alonso. He help me hose down the shelves and he got to play in the water. Hot day like this, it’s nice. And it’s easier for me, lot of shelves to clean.’ He looked at Ramón and nodded his head toward the door. ‘There are three more of these out there. Dried by the sun, mostly, while you slept in. Hot day to clean, but oh well.’

With a pang, Ramón imagined Alonso playing with the hose, holding a thumb over the end so the water misted and created rainbows in the sun. ‘So you don’t need me, then?’ Ramón asked.

‘Oh no, I still have a use for you, little weasel,’ El Ruso laughed but didn’t smile. ‘You can wheel these around the counter to the back as I bring them in. Just line them up against the far wall. Can you do that? Be careful not to bash into anything. They’re heavy but you can do it.’ With that, he ducked under the doorframe and went back outside.

Ramón struggled fiercely first with the idea to run back home, and, telling himself he was safe because his parents knew where he was and it didn’t sound like Alonso was dead, he then threw his full weight into moving the baker’s rack —

extremely heavy despite the wheels— past the tight corner at the counter. He moved carefully, terrified of what El Ruso might do if he knocked into anything.

Ramón had never been all the way in the back before. He'd only seen what was visible from the counter. It was a large room with racks full of large bowls, baskets, crates of ingredients stacked almost to the ceiling, and racks of different sizes, like the one Ramón was pushing. He wheeled it into the center of the room.

El Ruso helped him with the final two racks, having already lifted the remaining shelves through the low doorway, and as he lined them neat and gleaming against the wall, Ramón stared at his broad back and wondered if he would even feel it if he were to sneak up behind him and attack from behind. He could try punch him with all his might. Realizing the two of them were out of sight from the shop windows, he began to shake again and felt his eyes pulse with each beat of his heart. He started backing toward the door.

El Ruso turned to face him with a distracted expression, but upon seeing Ramón freeze mid-backward step, he frowned and folded his arms. 'You're afraid of me.'

Ramón could only nod.

He felt certain the man would ask why and very uncertain as to whether or not he would be able to attempt lying. But instead El Ruso said 'No reason to be. You know me all your life.' He raised his eyebrows and shrugged as if to say *Remember?*

Ramón felt his assumptions falter, but he said nothing.

'One more thing we do this afternoon,' El Ruso said. 'And if you help, I'll give you a peseta. Even though you don't deserve it.' He turned and went over to a corner, where several filled burlap bags were lined up. 'This is a couple days' worth of old bread. Shame for it to go to waste.'

Although he knew what these words meant, and that he was about to be assigned specifically to help El Ruso with the guilt bread, Ramón's heart leapt at the idea of earning money. In the end, though, his sense of justice won out.

'I saw what you did.' The words were out of his mouth, it seemed, faster than he could even think them. It was almost as if he hadn't said the words, rather, the secret had simply freed itself when he left his mouth hanging open.

El Ruso set the bag he was holding back down. 'And what was that?' he turned to look at him again, but his face wore a grim look that said he already knew. He seemed to be bracing himself to be struck. It was one of the first times Ramón had been spoken to like an adult.

'You killed a man. I saw you kill a man in the alley.' Again, Ramón's secret spoke against his will.

The man's expression turned to genuine confusion, and for a long moment the two stared at each other. The racks gleamed cheerfully between them.

'What?' El Ruso said at last.

'I was riding past the alleyway by the laundromat and *I saw you* kill that man. And everyone knows I'm here, so you can't kill me without the whole neighbourhood knowing, and they'll all come for you.' Breath was hard to come, like he'd been running uphill.

El Ruso blinked several times. 'Ramón, listen —'

'He was bad, right?' Ramón sobbed. 'He was going to hurt you! It's okay, if he was a bad man, it's okay. Sometimes bad men have to die.' He was so frightened and upset he began dry heaving, clutching at his knees which had gone weak. He looked at the tile floor, wondering if he would die there, and pitying himself for his fear, and for feeling embarrassed at such a time.

'You didn't see me kill anyone,' El Ruso said firmly. In two short strides, he was kneeling before the trembling Ramón so they were at eye level. 'I did not kill that man! You didn't see properly. We were... I was just hugging him,' he said. Something in his voice made Ramón look him in the eye. To his surprise, El Ruso seemed to be pleading with him.

'I saw your hands around his neck,' Ramón said between gasps.

El Ruso shut his eyes. 'We were drinking. My friend was very drunk. I'm big, I can drink more. I was trying to keep him upright. Just help him stand, that's all.'

'That's not what happened. Why were you hiding, then? Why were you in the alley if he wasn't trying to rob you, or you him! He was Falange.'

El Ruso laughed. 'He most certainly is not! Why would I drink with someone like that? If you come with me, I'll introduce him to you and you'll see him and then

you'll know. Falange! It's an insult. Ramón,' he reached out and placed a huge hand on Ramón's back, patting it. His voice was almost happy. 'I did not hurt this man. I do not hurt people. You know me all your life. You lit firecrackers in my shop. If I'm gonna kill somebody, it would have been you that day. But here you are, alive and still bothering me. Because I don't hurt good people.'

Ramón tried to remember the night as vividly as he could. He found he could recall the man's profile somewhat. He had curly hair, and a large nose. It may not have been the five arrows of the Falange that he saw on the man's jacket, as he thought he'd seen. It might have been the folds of his sleeve in the half light. Even arm officers took off their jackets in the heat.

El Ruso straightened. 'We'll go down to the tower by the river,' he said. 'We gonna give this bread to some Roma people who live there.'

Ramón looked at the man in wonder. Was the man he'd seen with El Ruso Roma? He imagined the look on Mamá's face if she ever found out El Ruso had enlisted him to help dole out the guilt bread to the gitanas, much less *deliver* it to them, or that they really did live in a tower.

But El Ruso knew how she felt about them. He knew she wouldn't approve. Maybe that's why they were going when everyone was inside, dodging the worst heat of the day.

That was a comfort. With so many people keeping to open windows and doorways due to the heat, if he were to get into trouble, if this were some kind of trick El Ruso was playing, he could shout and everyone would know. Plenty of people might even see them. What was he playing at?

'Are you going to stare at me all day like a cow watching the train pass by? Take one of these bags, I take the other three,' El Ruso said. 'Are you strong enough?'

Ramón slung the bag over his shoulder and did his best to appear as though he was not struggling under the weight of it. It seemed unlikely El Ruso would have this much extra bread to give away. But he knew that if El Ruso were dangerous, he was no more dangerous than any other person. Just more capable.

The walk was hot and long, though really the bakery was only a couple kilometres from the river, most of the way there consisted of the oldest part of town:

narrow, twisting cobblestone streets whose architects never dreamt of automobiles, which was really only a problem lately, with more military in town.

The tower by the river was made of white stone that shined in the sunlight that spent centuries bleaching it. The Moors had built it, long, long ago, and it was separated from the opposing shore by a very long, very wide stone footbridge. To Ramón it resembled a rather unambitious castle, though of course it was never intended to be anything but a fortified gate. It was for archers to defend from inside the tower. Ramón knew from school there used to be a whole wall around the city.

Once in school they were permitted by the city to tour that tower and walk what Tío said was called a *chemins des rondes* which provided ample room for those defending it to move around. With his friends he got onto his belly and looked at the footbridge below him from the crenellated wall, imagining the Moorish guards defending the stronghold, which had only one entrance and exit—unless you count jumping or falling.

It was also now locked up by the government. According to El Ruso, no Roma lived inside. But in one of the windows with shadows black as pitch in the glare of the sun, Ramón fancied he saw a small face peering out at him. When he looked again, no one was there.

The muddy, earthy smell of the river was noticeable from half a kilometer away, even on a breezeless day, and once they were upon the tower, the smell had become almost metallic and was so dense, Ramón felt certain it would sink into his clothes, and Mamá would be able to immediately sniff out where he'd been.

El Ruso veered off the walkway that led to the tower, and instead stepped onto the steep, rocky hillside beside the river. It had been a while since it rained, and different colored layers of brown and yellow showed how high the river could really go. Ramón followed, slipping a little on the loose rocks and struggling to keep hold of the heavy bag. As he followed El Ruso led him to a hidden corner under the bridge, out of view of the pathway above, explaining as they went that the river used to be much higher, and a couple hundred years ago, they would have been swept up in its current by now.

Several lean-tos were lined up in the nook where the pedestrian bridge overhead connected with the tower. They were constructed haphazardly with sheet metal and wood, and most had bedsheets hanging in front in lieu of a wall. They lazily rippled in the pitiful breeze generated by the thinning river. Two weathered tents stood on either side of the lean-tos in a way that reminded Ramón of the tower above. Guard posts.

El Ruso, gave a shrill whistle between his teeth.

‘The gitanas live under the bridge?’

‘These people do, for now, yes. But they have to move soon.’

A woman’s head peeked out from behind one of the sheets in front of a shelter, then disappeared just as quickly. Another whistle issued from somewhere under the bridge.

‘Aren’t they easy to find, though? Won’t the police see and arrest them, won’t people make them leave?’

El Ruso shook his head. ‘Police? No, not a crime to not have a home. Well, mostly not. They can’t be seen from the street. The people who live near the river don’t want to see them, but they can’t see them from there. So policeman won’t have a problem with them here as long as they’re quiet. Besides, it’s easier to know where to go when there’s trouble. Anything goes wrong, first people to be blamed, these people.’ He gestured to the lean-tos. ‘It’s an old story. And that’s why they have to move.’

‘What’s gone wrong?’

A few children, some Ramón’s age, hurried over to El Ruso, grabbing the bags from his hands like they weighed nothing. Ramón was relieved of his, as well. The smallest ones were younger than Marianita. They were too thin, and had dirt on their faces and clothes. They regarded Ramón quietly, as he calculated how many weeks of additional chores Mamá would sentence him to should he ever come home looking like that. But their mothers didn’t seem angry at all.

Two older children thanked Ramón and El Ruso, and an old man came over to speak with the baker. They walked a few paces closer to the river, El Ruso gesturing to Ramón to stay put. They spoke in quiet tones under the sound of the water, not wanting to be overheard.

Ramón was about to come closer anyway, when an elderly woman approached him. Her skin was very dark, and her eyes had a milky ring around them. His grandmother's eyes had been like that. She carried a sprig of dry rosemary, which she pressed into his palm hard enough that he could feel the sharp, dead leaves pricking his hand like pine needles. 'My son, you will marry very late in life. But you will see wondrous places and know many great people before you die. You are destined for a different home, but—' Ramón pulled his hand away from her, frightened, but she yanked it back. 'It will be okay,' she said kindly. When she smiled, she wasn't scary at all. 'It is a good life.' She tapped his hand gently and turned to walk away, tucking her hair behind her ear like young girls do. She didn't ask for money. Ramón noticed part of her ear was missing, but the injury was old, and had long since healed.

El Ruso had returned. He was carrying four empty burlap sacks.

'Come up this way,' he said, and he led Ramón back the way they came, walking behind him and catching him twice when he slipped on the rocks.

Ramón showed him the sprig of rosemary and told him about the fortune-teller, and what she had said. He did not ask El Ruso about her ear, even though he was burning to how it happened. He knew he wouldn't like the answer.

El Ruso shrugged. 'It's a living,' he said.

'Her job is fortune-teller?'

'Her job is to survive.'

Ramón thought this was an accusation. 'I don't have money to pay her!'

'She was thanking you.' He said it in the impatient way Papá does when someone is slow to catch on.

Without further explanation, El Ruso led Ramón around the tower and further into town, stacked up higher and higher the further you went from the river. This area was more populated, and well-off. Shops were spread further apart, and the high, open windows that faced the river showed a spectacular view of the river, which looked almost blue from high up, and the grey and brown mountains beyond that seemed close but Mamá said were actually very far away and so tall that their peaks never lost their snow, because the air got colder the higher up you went. Ramón didn't believe

that was the reason, though. If that were true, why didn't steam from a bowl roll down? Hot air goes up.

It wasn't long before Ramón realised they were near the wealthy neighbourhood his father despised. He could see the bakery, Monteguillo's, and was surprised when El Ruso strode across the street right in front of it, even more surprised when he walked up to the front door and went in, beckoning Ramón to follow.

Monteguillo's was cool inside, and the walls were painted light blue, with delicate, hand-painted gold filigree designs around the white ceiling. The air smelled cold and sweet.

A bell had tinkled as they walked through the door, and after a moment's pause a man's voice answered 'Just a moment!'

'Why are we here?' Ramón asked. Papá would have a fit if he knew his son was here. *Elitists!* he could hear him yell.

'I'm proving my innocence, as promised,' El Ruso's eyes flicked away from the counter to meet Ramón's. He looked different now that they were inside, or perhaps Ramón had never bothered to really look at him before. There were tiny purple veins under his eyes. He looked tired and old as every adult did but also very bright, somehow. Full of color. Ramón wondered if the little veins were something that happened to your eyes if you cried a lot, though he couldn't imagine El Ruso crying.

A man younger than El Ruso man walked backwards through double doors, two large trays of glistening fruit tarts in each hand. He set them down on a back counter and was halfway through his greeting before he turned around and stopped.

Ramón stared at Monteguillo. The curly hair, the nose... This was, most definitely, the man El Ruso had fought in the alley.

'Janek,' the man's young features bloomed into a radiant smile. 'What—' he stopped when at last he noticed Ramón, and his smile faded like the sun behind a cloud. He looked searchingly between the two of them. 'This... must be your son?'

'Piero Monteguillo, this is the son of the owners of the taberna, across the street from me,' El Ruso said. 'I bring him here because he thinks I killed you in an alleyway two nights ago.'

Monteguillo's eyes widened and his mouth formed a perfect 'O.' He looked from El Ruso to Ramón, who blushed, feeling scrutinized and foolish.

El Ruso laughed. 'He saw us one night when we walked from La Taberna. You passed out, remember? I was angry you couldn't hold your drink and he thinks I strangled you.'

Ramón saw something pass between the two men that he didn't understand, and wasn't meant to. That annoying wordless talking adults can do when children are around.

'Host of Christ,' Monteguillo said, looking at El Ruso, then Ramón again. He placed both hands on the front counter. 'How frightened you must have been. A big man like him. Seems like he certainly could kill a man. But you can see that I am fine, and we are friends.' He smiled at El Ruso. 'Of course, I do recognize you. You have a sister, don't you? Well, since you were so thoughtful to check on me, would you like a tart?' He leaned in like he was telling a secret. 'It's for a rich old lady's birthday. On the house.'

Not Falange then. 'Can I have one for my two sisters?'

Ramón felt a sharp poke on his shoulder from El Ruso. 'I mean thank you, yes, please. Thank you. But may I please also have one for my two sisters? They cry if I get something and they don't.'

'He only has one sister,' El Ruso said, and Piero clapped his hands and laughed, the exact opposite of what any grown up he knew would do, including Papá. His dark eyes seemed to shine with mischief. 'Aren't you clever? I had a sister like yours growing up, always wanted what I had.' He wrapped three tarts and handed them to Ramón. 'The third is for your poor mamá, whose hair you will surely turn grey. I should know. I was very clever, too.' He winked.

By the time they returned home, the sun was at last beginning to relent, and the streets were cooler in the lengthening shadows. In a ray of light Ramón could see the water rising up as steam from the dirty bucket a woman threw from an entryway into the street, and it looked like a good sign. El Ruso was still a mystery, but there was nothing to fear from him.

Four loyalists were waiting outside the bakery. They didn't seem to be the friendly kind that said nice things about Mamá's flowers and handed out flyers until they got bored, but they nodded to El Ruso and he nodded back.

As promised, Ramón got his peseta, and when he walked back across the street with the tarts, he felt as though he had been given a secret message, a real grown-up wordless message just for him, to keep folded up in his pocket until he was old enough to understand.

The first raid happened two days later.

6.

HAIDEILIA
OCTOBER, 2022

I email Leith the link to the site that lists names of children sent to England from the Basque region, but he's already seen it and no Ramón seems to pan out. So instead, after my one seminar for the day ends, I go all the way home, intending to just work or maybe write before I realize Ava tried to call this morning, after days of ignoring my return calls the day I went to The Met.

It's been too long since we talked, so now I have to call her back. Otherwise the guilty, wrenching feeling will move upward and constrict my breath, like my lungs are in a vice, tightening with every exhalation. It makes me wish for a quick, violent death. A sword to run myself through with. Imagining it brings a little relief, a little atonement.

I've never showed Ava where I live. She has the address, but was never curious about it, so she doesn't really know. The outside of our house—well, *Ben's* parents' house—doesn't show much personality. It blends in with the brownstones, some of which are truly grand. A closer look, though, would reveal some of the homes, like this one, have only one doorbell.

If I could open up the face of the building like a doll's house, I'd see two of its five bedrooms, every floor a bit weathered and dated except for the freaky split-level top floor that Ben's parents paid to have converted into their own in-law unit during the first lockdown. That way, they wouldn't have to stay in hotels when they came down from Connecticut to visit Ben. But that happened precisely once, at Christmas of 2020, and since then, they're back to staying at some other place they prefer. As definite members of the 1%, they are insane, but they're also kind, and try hard not to come across as stuffy or out of touch.

Home is a complicated word. I mentioned that to Jane, when I came back to school, and she said home life was so difficult that she couldn't bring herself to use the word 'family' until her son was four years old.

Familiar metal clink and satisfying *thuck* of the chunky lock flipping back into its compartment, and then the same cartoonish old lady voice in the creak of the door as I push it open: *Eeeeeeeeeeeehhhhhh?*

The front room curtains are open wide to the bright day, and the floor next to the couch is strewn about with textbooks, and cup of tea on a stone coaster where Nikki left it. The house smells like garlic and onions and jerk seasoning —she was cooking and studying, putting Ben and me to shame. As usual.

I can hear a shower on upstairs.

I check my phone while I kick off my shoes. There are, as expected, two texts from Ava. My throat is suddenly dry as I walk through the hall into the kitchen for water, manually unlocking my phone as I go. I scroll too quickly through a string of missed notifications and only see her second text: ‘I am ok tho. Just call when u can.’

The band of anxiety around my chest loosens a little. At least she said she’s ok. I set the phone down on the island and open the cabinet next to the sink and let what I know I’ll find inside make me smile.

Cheerful, contrarian combination of glassware that makes sense for a modern kitchen with a shocking amount of sentimental detritus that Ben’s parents had no use for in Greenwich. My favorite hidden somewhere amid pint glasses from music festivals and tchotchke souvenir mugs from classic American tourist traps — Tombstone, Gettysburg, Mount Rushmore... ah, there she is. The NEW ORLEANS JAZZ FESTIVAL, 2004. Harlequin diamond pattern in purple, yellow, and green. It looks like stained glass. As I fill it from the tap, my phone buzzes.

Speak of the devil.

Benny



up for bracing margarita at taqueria before we are crushed to death tomorrow night? 7pm? say yes.

Yes! Also Leith is going (!!) so can you text me the venue addy

OoOoOoOoh!

Dropped pin

I forward it to Leith and immediately hear back.
The front door opens and closes and Ben calls hello.
'Hey, in the kitchen,' I say, pulling up Leith's reply.

Leith Kadar

Ty! Will be slightly late to the
concert but can def make it.
You said bring helmet +
kneepads, right?

I start with 'awesome,' but autocorrect remembers a more effusive time and changes it all caps. I hit backspace and try again, and it autocorrects to all caps again. A sign I should make an effort to sound intelligent. Instead of backspacing, it sends.

Leith Kadar

Ty! Will be slightly late to the
concert but can def make it.
You said bring helmet +
kneepads, right?

AWESOME
Delivered

'Oh Jesus Christ.' Why is the fucking return button right under the fucking
backspace button?

Gah sorry, wasn't finished
typing. That's great! Yes,
bring a kevlar vest / any
riot gear you happen to have
lying around 🙌🙄

Only have my sister's old pink
elbow pads

You'll fit right in
Read

I'm such a moron.

'I thought you'd be at the library longer,' Ben says mid-yawn. He shuffles over
to the sink and stoops down to wash his hands.

I scroll back through my texts and see I missed one from Steve, who never, ever texts. Two words.

Steve

Call me.

‘Oh god.’

‘What?’

‘Steve just said to call him,’ I say, dialing.

‘Is that a bad thing?’

Barely through the first ring, Steve answers. ‘Hey, H-Haideilia,’ his tone is agitated. ‘You h-h-hear from Jared or your mom yet today?’ From the stammer, only noticeable when he’s keyed up, to calling Ava ‘your mom,’ it’s all wrong. I know exactly the posture he’s in. Fingers of one hand massaging his balding head, eyes squeezed shut for focus as he presses the phone to his hear with his other hand.

‘What happened?’

‘S-so-so, I’ll take that as a no. Ok. Sh-she, ah, Ava’s fine, she’s fine, and safe, s-so I want you to know that straight out. Ok? But, uh, but apparently there was a robbery, uh, at her, her church office w-while she was there.’

‘What! At gunpoint?’ I’m half standing when a wave of fear so huge it threatens to throw me to the ground forces me to lean over the countertop, weak-kneed.

Ben whirls around, wide-eyed.

‘No! I-I mean, sorry — yes, it was. But not a sh-shooting. No one was hurt. They didn’t touch her. They got the money and left. And she’s uh, at home now, I think. But uh, obviously though, it’s been a hell of a morning with police and I tracked Jared down at school. I’m headed over to Ava’s in an hour. Jare’s already home with her. Um, uh-a-and I talked to Ava on the phone already, her church-friend Claire is at the house with her, and seriously, H, she’s fine. I just wanted you to know.’

‘When was this?’

‘Is everyone ok?’ Ben asks. Then, when I nod, he gestures to his palm and mouths *speakerphone!*

‘Today. This morning.’

The kitchen island slides out of focus, and for a moment the fear is gone, along with all feeling, until an icy cascade, adrenaline, snaps it almost painfully back into focus. ‘I need to know,’ my voice sounds so calm, ‘everything that happened.’

Ben walks over and gently takes the phone out of my hand, puts it on speaker, then sets it down on the counter. He holds both of his hands up in the overarticulated way saints in medieval paintings do and stares at the counter, listening, lips parted.

‘W-well, I can tell you what she told me,’ Steve says, his voice echoes through the kitchen. ‘It was after s-some kind of planning committee meeting, apparently. Some kids no one recognized came into the front office and demanded the, the cash they had to hand. They got it and left. Close to seven grand, Ava said. I told her m-my current working theories are one, it has to be people who knew enough about how they operate to know when there would be cash in the front office and, and two, I don’t think the god stuff is, is really working out for her.’ He lets out a quick dry laugh.

From the corner of my eye, I see Ben’s jaw drop. He looks at me for a reaction.

‘Yeah, she didn’t think that was funny either,’ Steve says.

‘Kids held her up?’

‘Well, teenagers. Jare’s age, she said. High school.’

‘How many?’

‘Three.’

‘What else, what did they say to her? Did they touch her?’

‘N-no, no one touched her. — Look, she was at the front desk,’ he says, keeping his voice even, sticking to simple facts. ‘She said three kids came in, three teenage boys. First one pointed a gun and told her to bring him the cash box, w-which she did. It was her and I think two other people working with her in the front at the time. One of them got the box and handed it to her so she could hand it over. A-a-and they took her purse and some guy’s wallet.’

‘He pointed a gun *at* her, he didn’t just show it to her?’

Steve takes a breath. ‘Yes. She said he pointed it *at* her.’

I am ok tho. Just call when u can.

‘What the hell, Steve?!’ my voice is higher than normal and Ben flinches. When I raise my voice, when I feel upset, I sound like her, I can hear it. Steve’s made the comparison before. Hurling it like an insult when he’s really angry, ‘*Jesus Haideilia, you sound like your mother.*’

But he doesn’t say that now. ‘She’s fine, H. Listen to me. I-I know this is the last thing we need, but I’m telling you, she doesn’t even sound shaken. And it was very fast with the police. Her church-friend Claire said the police took a statement and an EMT checked her out at the scene—’

‘Why an EMT?’

‘To make sure she was ok. Th-there was a silent alarm, and one of her co-workers triggered it. Every silent alarm system works like that, you get police, fire, ambulance. Th-there were more taxpayer dollars on the payroll at the scene than there was money stolen. But no one was hurt. I’m telling you. They said give over the money, money was given over, kids bolted. Th-three, three minutes maximum. The way she tells it, I don’t think it even felt real to her. It happened so fast there wasn’t even enough time to really feel the danger.

‘H-hang on, someone’s texting me. Can’t see a fuckin’ thing—’ he mutters his voice growing distant as he moves the phone an arm’s length away. Clicking sound as he fumbles in his shirt pocket for his glasses, as I’ve seen him do a thousand times.

‘At least she’s ok, right?’ Ben asks.

‘Um.’

This familiarity, Steve’s calmness, helps. As does remembering to breathe. With a finger I trace the precise, certain lines of a green diamond in the harlequin pattern on my glass, trying to calm down enough to get up. Better to be moving.

‘Ok, so this is suspiciously fast: Jared says the police think they have one of the kids. He said since they had her hand over her purse, fortunately her phone wasn’t in it, sh-she’s been calling the bank and credit cards. He said she thinks maybe they tried to use one,’ he snorts.

‘You don’t think they caught the right person?’

‘They caught *someone*. If they’re Jared’s age, they’re definitely stupid enough to use one of her credit cards. But this seems too quick. Though I suppose one way or

another, I mean, eventually...’ I can see him holding out a hand, shaking his head in disgust. *You know how these things end.* And another chill runs through me.

Ava. Never complacent, never upstaged *Ava*, could she really have stepped so far out of character, act as different as she looks? She let her hair grow out after Dolly’s death and the suicide attempt, from the Audrey Hepburn pixie cut she’d always had into striking, shoulder-length silver waves. It surprises me every time I see her.

But she’s still *Ava*. *That Ava*, the woman who slapped Ted Enyert’s mother in front of 20 people at the playground when Mrs Enyert didn’t reprimand her son for pouring a bucket of dirt on me, ruining the new playclothes *Ava*’d bought — *handed over her purse?* Just handed it over along with those rectitudinous lizards who preyed on her need for community and roped her into their charade?

Impossible.

Ben touches my arm. ‘Are you ok?’

I play out a conspiracy theory in which she’s really dead and Steve is, in fact, in his car, speeding toward short-term parking and departures at DTW, nothing packed, ready to hop the first plane to New York. Just buying time. Saying whatever he needs to until he can get here, to make sure I don’t flip out like she did. Although that would be understandable, in a sense, it’s even less likely than *Ava* permitting a loss of control over any situation. He knows I’m much more like him than like her.

‘You’re shocked,’ Steve says.

‘I’m... I just can’t believe she didn’t jump over the counter and try to grab the gun,’ I say to both of them.

His relieved laughter is contagious until unbidden, I imagine her body thrown backward by the force of the shot into an office chair. Her hair would be long enough to cover her face now. A year ago it wasn’t.

I can feel my own face crumple, the jazz festival glass shimmers, then fades into a blur with the rest of the kitchen. Ben leans down for a hug and rests his head on top of mine, rubbing my arm.

Steve has stopped laughing. ‘Well, I’m certainly relieved she acted reasonably. You could think of it as a positive sign, H. She really does want to stick around.’

‘Should I...should I fly back?’

‘No. Absolutely not. I mean, unless it’s something you need to do. And don’t you dare do it just because she asks you to. I-i-i-in fact, I want you to call me and tell me if she asks you to do that. Ok? Jared is checking in with me, so is she, and unfortunately I’ve now got church-friend Claire’s number. Ava is well-liked, and well known here, so remember that. I’m sure they’ll have half the congregation over there by tomorrow, along with the usual academic elites. Not-not that that’s ever a good mix, but what can you do.’

Ben says he’ll be right back and hurries out of the kitchen. Looking for tissues I’m sure.

Ava’s phone goes straight to voicemail, so I call Jared.

‘*Doo-dle.*’ He does the usual schtick, overenunciates his nickname for me, putting on his best hey-there-buddy Michigander accent, to signal right away that he’s fine, ‘Doodle, what the eff —when I *call you*, you’re s’posed to *pick up*. That’s our little thing, Dood. How are we gonna build trust this way?’

Hearing that he’s fine enough to joke around is a profound relief. ‘Jared, I’m so sorry, Steve just called... Can I talk to her?’

He sighs, dropping the act. ‘Yeah, hang on.’ His footsteps echo through the receiver. Unfamiliar voices and a ringing office phone rise around him. ‘I’m just coming back from the bathroom and when I left they were moving to another area. I gotta find her now.’

‘Are you ok? Where are you?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine. We’re at the precinct. A *detective* called and said some cop on the beat a few blocks from the mothership picked someone up who I guess matched a photo they had of one of the guys from the security cam. So they asked Ma, Pumpkin Spice lady, and that guy who looks like Woody Allen to come identify him. Haideilia,’ his voice is serious, ‘I can’t stand these people,’ A door opens and closes as he moves into an quieter area. ‘And I’m worried she’s never going to get sick of them.’

Ben sets a box of tissues down on the counter.

‘Hang on, who’s Pumpkin Spice? Ben’s here.’

‘Oh, hey Ben. Pumpkin Spice lady is Claire. You’ve met her. Claire McGrady. She has a *brand*, don’t you know anything,’ he pretends to be offended. ‘You’re such a reject. She’s the Pumpkin Spice Lady Preacher. T-M. Of blog and TikTok fame. She’s like fifty-five years old.’

‘That’s not real.’ Ben is scandalized.

‘Oh, the PSLP is real, friends. She’s as real as it gets. This is what happens when we make it easy for stupid people to access each other: *Influencers*. Case in point? I suggested she replace her clunky tagline, which is “Loving the lord and preaching the word with a hint of spice,” with the obviously superior “Jesus Christ, it’s Pumpkin Spice,” and she rejected it on the spot.’ He knocks on a door.

‘What a fool.’

‘That’s what I’m saying. But goddamn it if she and her little minions don’t bring Ava business. The firm just hired two more people to keep up. Ok, I found her, but I’m stuck in the hallway because there’s a sign that says no cellphone. Singular, and I only have one.’ A door opens. ‘Thanks, sorry. —Ma. Ma! Come on, it’s Haideilia. It says no phones, you have to come out here.’

‘No, you’re good,’ a deep voice says near the receiver. ‘Yeah, you’re good, go ahead in.’

Ava’s voice comes through clear as a bell over the sound of other people talking. ‘She called? What did she say?’

‘Yeah, she’s on now. Here, take it. Love you, Doodle, hugs and kisses.’

‘Love you, too.’

There’s a fumbling noise. ‘Can you hold this? —Hello, my daughter,’ Ava breathes. She’s using her podcast-and-university-lecture voice, low and elegant. Ava the Architect.

‘Hey, I’m so sorry.’ My throat constricts, suddenly dry. ‘Steve caught me up, but I just wanted to... to hear your voice. Are you ok?’

‘I’m fine, I am fine,’ again the control. She has an audience in that room. ‘Truly, I was never afraid for a second. I know this sounds unbelievable, but I saw the gun and I looked at that kid, and I saw him as a mother. I thought, this “could be my son.”’

‘I have an alibi,’ Jared says in the background and she shushes him.

‘He is someone’s son. I could see in his eyes that he didn’t want to hurt anyone. So I said you know what, we’re going to make this easy, and no one panicked. It was a kind of grace. It was really very humbling.’

I shut my eyes, but I’m too relieved to do more than wince. ‘It’s good you felt confident he didn’t want to hurt you,’ the words come out slowly like this voice isn’t mine, I have to force it to say them. ‘And I think you guaranteed that outcome when you decided to comply with them. Right? And now you’re there to see if you can identify someone.’

‘They haven’t told us yet how it works with minors. None of them were older than Jared, I’m certain of that. But I don’t know if you heard they took my purse. Mamá’s purse, actually, you know the one.’

‘Mm-hmm, her green bag.’ She’s making it sound like Dolly was a baroness with a collection of favored designer bags, but *you know the one*. As far as I know, she only ever had one. Small rectangle of light green silk with a silver chain that Dolly patiently allowed me to rummage through over and over again as a kid while she did my hair. A calming thought.

‘Yes. I finally had it professionally cleaned and restored. It helps, when I’m missing her, to carry it around.’

Inside, Dolly kept a black wallet, small perfume atomizer, a tube of lipstick with a mirror at the base, about a thousand loose tissues, and one or two rolls of Certs mints. Always Certs, never anything else. Nice thing to have, for missing her, now that I think about it. You could open it and breathe her in. Well, not anymore. Not after being ‘professionally cleaned.’ Maybe it *was* some sort of vintage designer bag. ‘Right.’

‘Oh, you *did* know all of that,’ she says, dropping the act a little. I haven’t done enough to let her know I’m listening.

‘I didn’t know it was Dolly’s old purse, but I knew they stole it and you were calling the bank.’

‘Yes. And I set up a credit alert right away. I think every card in my wallet was reported as stolen before the police even arrived. And now it’s going to take a couple

business days to get the new cards in. I haven't heard anything, but I'm both concerned and hopeful they might have tried to use one of my cards. Concerned for them, hopeful for the chance to have Mamá's purse back, even if it's empty. If I could just have that returned, I'd be happy. I told the officer I'd recently lost my mother and this is just irreplaceable. I feel like I've handed over a part of her.'

The final words are like a slap. 'Please don't say that. You did the right thing. Dolly would have wanted you to do exactly what you did. She wanted you to live a good life.' The Dolly connection is a nighttime river, full of dark undercurrents. 'I really hope you'll get it back, Ava. And I'm glad you're safe. But listen. Dr. Valdez has to hear about this, about exactly what you just said to me. Because Ava, this only *just* happened, you know? There might be other feelings that come up, so it's important you tell her.' It's a risk, bringing up her doctor at all, but it has to be said.

'For the first time in my life,' she begins, and the softer edges of the podcast voice harden again, 'I have a real community. I'm part of a community that doesn't define me in terms of deficits, and instead just wants to grow with me. And today, I was able to do something to protect that community.' She breaks for a moment to let that hit home. 'So whatever happens now, at least I know they're going to pick up the phone, and show up.'

'Okay.' A distant voice points out that this means she isn't going to ask me to come home, at least not yet. 'You're still going to tell her though, right?'

'Enough about this. Tell me about school. What did you think of the article I sent?'

'Um, well, I have an assignment for the end of the term that I think you'd —'

'Wh —ok! Haideilia, we're being called in now. Can I call you later?' Her tone is already distracted.

'Sure. I love you, Ava.' The words are awkward now, they have been for months. Like trying to repeat a phrase in a language I've never spoken. But it isn't that I don't mean it.

Beep beep beep.

She's gone. I clear her texts and focus on the facts. I don't know for sure she heard me I love you. That's ok. The police might have even brought in the right person. The kids who held her up have no reason to come back. Jared's fine.

I tell Ben I'm ok, but he doesn't buy it. 'That was the last thing you needed.' He heats up some leftover pho from the fridge for both of us. I try to eat it, but the process is disgusting, the noodles and bok choy heavy and tasteless on my tongue, so I give up and tell him I'll just take my time getting ready.

And I stay with the motions of that, I miss Nikki when I go upstairs but hear Ben telling her what happened as I try to fix my hair because the three of us are supposed to go out tonight. The motions of dampening my hair with my neon green spray bottle that makes the water look radioactive, put product in, start to gently diffuse it, like Dolly taught me, because I'd inherited her curly hair, then remember it's only early afternoon and crawl into bed with damp hair. It's going to be a nightmare later.

Nikki added a few bright purple streaks to her hair a couple days ago. They're striking against her many thick black braids that trail halfway down her back. Seeing those streaks on her for the first time, it seemed silly they hadn't always been there. They fit. They fit with her confidence, her face.

Nikki's ability to upstage may be the reason Ava doesn't care to see the rest of this incredible house. 'Hey Ava,' she'd said during the first video call I'd had with her, back in our tiny shared campus dorm room. She interrupted Ava mid-stream, leaning over the chair I was sitting in.

I watched Ava take in her features. Eyebrow ring and a septum piercing where she occasionally wears a thin silver ring that makes her look like a ferocious, beautiful bull. And with all of that the magnetic ability to really command a space. 'I'm Nikki. I call my mom by her first name, too. I don't want to interrupt further, but just wanted to say hello and tell you Haideilia's perfect. No notes.'

Ben knocks on my door. It's the Ben knock: a light *tap-tap-tap-tap* without announcing who it is. I sit up, and it's dark outside.

Pang of adrenaline, and I check my phone. Almost 7pm. *Shit.*

‘Come in,’

‘Hey,’ he lingers in the doorway, slouching and wearing a puppyish look.

‘Nikki’s making popcorn. We figured we could enjoy a double-feature. Just stay in and stay up a bit. We’ve got a whole digital library of classics to choose from on Hulu, and we need you to help us find either the best or the weirdest ones.’

‘Thanks, Ben. I’m really ok. I’m just worried about her. I’m worried about my brother.’

‘I know.’ He takes a deep breath as though he’d forgotten to breathe this entire time. He waves his arms and when climb out of the bed and walk over to hug him, he swings us back and forth. ‘I don’t say this enough, but I think you’re just the prettiest, big curly-haired queen and I love that you still wear old sweaters from your high school and I’m obsessed with you forever.’

I didn’t even pay attention to the sweater I threw on today, and it makes me laugh. And I want to say I love you but my throat constricts, so instead I reach up a hand and place it on his shoulder, and try to tell him with a look.

‘Ok, we’re downstairs when you’re ready. Let’s make it weird. Like weird babies or something, whatever scares Nikki the most. Like what-the-fuck-did-I-just-watch weird.’

Swallowing, I force my throat back open long enough to say ‘*Eraserhead* and *Spider Baby* it is.’

He taps the air with his index finger as he says ‘Already freaked out.’

I shove my laptop, a notebook, and a few pens back into my bag and turn to my bedroom door, but it’s open, and now Nikki is there. Another check-in.

‘Hey,’ she says.

‘What, are you tag-teaming this now?’

‘You know movie night starts now. You should have seen Ben today. He’s got enough energy to fight a bear.’

‘I know.’

‘I just want to hang out. Lately I miss being made to watch Georges Méliès and Alice Guy Blanché movies and ...what’s that one who did the one about the Russian kid who makes a bell.’

I can't help but grin. 'Tarkovsky.' *Andrei Rublev*.

'Yeah, all of it. You see these names I can name now? Do you know how many women I pull just by knowing niche French film?'

'They're not *niche*...' We start down the stairs. 'And Tarkovsky—'

'Stop. Whatever. I want to watch a Haideilia recommendation or I want to watch absolute garbage.'

'That's essentially what Ben said.'

We end up watching an awful made-for-TV version of *The Langoliers* from the 90s, eventually turning the volume down so we can dub over it with our own stupid jokes, laughing until we have tears in our eyes.

7.

HAIDEILIA

NOVEMBER, 2022

My phone buzzes for the eighth time on the walk over to the subway, so I look to see if it's Steve or Ava. Steve.

One of the best things about the subway in the winter, aside from the respite from the biting cold, is its ability to act as a massive 5G jammer between certain stations. No texts, no calls, no videos, no news. Just people pretending or people staring at a fixed point that seems safe, like your shoes, or a IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING poster. Avoiding the eyes of others.

The stairs at the entrance on West 86th are jammed with a single current of rush hour commuters spilling up and out like bees from a hive, looking over and past each other's shoulders and screwing around with their phones, still on the hustle. Enlivened by the escape from office lighting into open air. I don't want to fight against the current to get down there. I'll walk a bit.

In the long crosswalk over Broadway, my hair is blown across my face by a freakishly strong gust of icy wind the buildings had been blocking. It forces me to take a step sideways and I get stuck foot traffic jam of people behind an tough-looking old man in a wheelchair. Gaunt face, mouth set in an angry line. No opening to get around him.

Between frizzy strands in my line of vision, a shortish, middle-aged man in a navy blue suit with an iPhone pressed to his ear maneuvers ahead of me, fearlessly bumping into other people and even causing the man in the wheelchair to stop for a second to avoid hitting him, but the old man doesn't complain. When Blue Suit gets across, a youngish tweaker with a spotted, pink-mouthed pit bull on a rope leash calls out from where he was blending into the building he'd been leaning against. I can't hear him, but it's obvious what he's asking. 'Hey man, you have a light?' Waves a cigarette.

The man reaches into a pocket. Smokers are so good at marking each other. Steve is like that. Quicker to respond to the needs of people like him than those

closest to him, though it must be admitted he is trying harder now, in his own incompetent way, to show up as a father.

The pit bull lunges toward something moving on the concrete, snarling, and his owner has to use both hands to hold him back. 'Brutus!' he yells. He moves the unlit cigarette into his mouth to avoid crushing it against the leash and it twitches between his lips as he yells. 'God damn it, down! Down! *Fuck!*' The dog settles, barely containing his excitement. Blue Suit holds out his lighter and produces —*how?*— a steady flame in the constant wind. His other hand keeps the phone to his ear, never interrupting the rhythm of his conversation. The man and his dog manage to stay still long enough for the cigarette to light, again in insane wind, and without taking a drag removes it from his mouth, and mutters a thank you before returning to calming his dog. Brutus was after a bold pigeon, it looks like.

Blue Suit glances at me as I help the old man force the wheels of his chair over a puddle of disintegrating garbage blocking his way onto the pavement. I smile at him and he looks away. It feels wrong, and not just because it's weird to smile at strangers in New York. I can sense how wrong it must look, having tried again this morning. Something broken inside it that I don't know how to fix, even after studying photos from moments when it came naturally. I make sure my eyes smile too, and I lift my chin a little, but it's useless. There's something off about it no matter what I do. Something grotesque. But he moves on, and the old man moves on, and this time I get around him.

The plan was to look rather hard at the pavement while passing the man and his dog, but something white catches the corner of my eye. He has foregone the traditional sign and opted to write on the brick wall behind him, in chalk. FEED THE DOG in giant block letters with an arrow pointing more or less toward Brutus.

The man stares at me, shamelessly, taking a drag on his cigarette. He raises his eyebrows. *Well?*

I make an I'm sorry grimace and keep walking, pulling out my phone for comfort, and hate myself for it. I'll leave it off.

It takes forever to get to the library because I decide to take the 1 and get off at Times Square to walk the remaining half mile through a sea of people who huddle in

various groups and stop suddenly because they have no idea where they're going. The crowds on the train becoming oppressive. Why did I think this would be better than just dealing with it? A question I ask myself more and more often.

But I do make it, and hurry up the steps which, of course, are bedotted with people taking pictures of other people standing in front of the massive building. The two lions that flank the stairs are both already wearing Christmas wreaths.

I go through the worryingly quick security check and find Leith just beyond the checkpoint, off to the side, waiting. The ceiling is massive, stories high. I want to find an out-of-the-way place to take it in, but it's not possible in the crowd of people coming in.

'You made it,' he says, and hugs me. When we let go, the place where his hand touched my back burns. I have so many questions for him but can't ask them. Because he looks exhausted and why destroy this? Why ruin this one small, meaningless joy to disappear into and forget this... what? This grief, this living grief that like a sickness has turned me inside out. And his, so much worse.

Right? Real death, and all that.

He moves us through the crowd, past a gift shop and people stopping in the middle of the hallway to take pictures of the ornate wooden ceiling, wood that has been carved into the shape of gilded flowers and leaves with soft green backgrounds... then a sudden left turn and we make it into the elevator just before the doors close and escape onto the third floor, where even more people mill around.

Leith cuts through a sea of tourists like a shark. Real New Yorker. I check my phone —text from Steve: *'Ignore my last. Just want to check in call when you can'*— and start filming him as he navigates his way around people, making it easy for me to follow in his wake. We go down two hallways in quick succession. Each is full of signs and art and bird's eye views of the entryway below with all its bustling security checking in and checking out, but there's not time to pause. He continues on through two large, open doorway and suddenly we're in yet another wooden room packed with people, only this time they're all waiting in line. We join it.

The room leads to an endpoint where you can go left or right. A line of shuffling bodies slowly enters and exits the room on the left, but the one on the right gets very little traffic. A loud security guard sits next to the doorway of each room.

‘Are you taking a video?’ Leith asks.

I nod, then swing the phone so he’s looking directly into the camera. He makes a wide-eyed face, and I slowly zoom in on his eye until he starts laughing and then stop filming.

‘Am I not allowed to take a video in here?’

‘I don’t know, so don’t ask anyone,’ is the quiet answer. ‘Anyway, I just thought this would be a good place for us to... Well, my dad’s research into Redding’s life. He’s really not *that* well-known, strictly speaking, so there are maybe several dozen academics who will care about this, if at all —’

‘I’d heard of him.’ That’s how we started talking, last year. Right before the world changed. I was able to somehow access a critical if vague memory from high school, of an English class that covered a single poem of his, one that ended with the words ‘with bright green wings,’ and that was that.

‘Yeah, fair. Even Dad would have admitted he wasn’t really...well. He didn’t fit in with the beat poets, and when you look back at that time, that’s who you see. Not him. But I don’t think you’d be able to write a book on postmodern poetry without mentioning him, at least.’

‘Not an unexamined life, then.’

‘Not an unexamined life,’ he says quietly, and smiles.

We move forward at a shuffle until we’re second-to-next in line.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa—this is for researchers only. Visitors and tourists over there, you can stay behind the rope if you’re going to take pictures,’ The security guard for the righthand room holds out a thick arm to stop a well-to-do, older blonde woman from breezing through.

‘I have a library card,’ she protests.

‘Everyone here has a library card. They give out library cards like cheese. Research only.’ She lets her arm down only after the woman walks away and nods to

Leith. We pass through unmolested. I guess we look the part. As we enter, Leith raises an eyebrow and mouths *like cheese?*

‘Yeah I don’t know.’

Inside is some version of academic heaven. Story-high windows allow natural light in on both sides of the massive room. Around the perimeter are two floors of books—all humanities, according to Leith—and neat rows of long tables with lamps, most full of people on laptops, writing, pouring over books. Above them are two long rows of massive, four-tiered chandeliers with round bulbs, and above all is the granddaddy of ornately beautiful ceilings, with painted frames of pink and grey clouds illuminated against a bright blue sky. God is not painted in, and it’s a relief. It is what it is: a permanently blue sky to research and write beneath, no matter what the weather is outside. It’s perfect. Framing these panels of sky is more ornate wooden and gold accents. There are figures beneath the murals of what at first appear to be angels, but there are no halos. They are topless, winged women, holding up the sky.

Leith leads us down a largely unoccupied table, one without outlets, and gestures for me to choose a seat as he starts to unpack his laptop. He notices there aren’t any outlets, shrugs, and pulls out a notebook.

The table in front of us has outlets, so I point to them. He shakes his head. ‘I’d rather be able to spread out,’ he says, then looks back toward where we came in. There are twin digital screens with numbers on them. ‘I ordered books earlier today. I’m going to see if my number’s up early. Just a sec.’ And he walks to the front of the room, to a large service booth where librarians wait, then trots back. ‘Sorry, did you request anything?’

I lift the wooden chair to make sure it doesn’t cause a scraping noise. ‘Ah, no.’ I can’t explain that the best I can do since last summer is plan things maybe one hour in advance unless given explicit instructions—it’s a miracle I’m passing this semester. Everything is present-tense now. Whatever I can do while I wait to feel better, only waiting implies there’s a future where things are different and that doesn’t seem likely. Well, minus these brief distractions from marking time.

Leith returns with four books, and one of them is about Steven Redding, the poet. The rest, of course, are about the Temple of Dendur, which I'd mentioned I wanted to learn more about. He slides them over to me.

'Why?' I whisper.

'I thought you'd like them. When I research, I kind of need a jumping off point. Some detail about their lives... Figured maybe there'd be a couple here that didn't...' He can't finish the thought but flashes a teasing look, and slowly hands me one of the books. 'Doesn't hurt to look,' he says.

Without reading the title I flip to the heavy hardback over and open it from the back to skim the index. I only committed one name to memory: LEONARDO 1820. I flip to it. Someone called Leonardo went there on an expedition in 1820 and painstakingly carved his name there like it was a park bench. But given how neat and relatively even the name and date are, in a weird way he must have had some amount of respect for the place. At least, he understood that it would outlast him, and that's why he put his name on it. To be a little less anonymous (but not totally known, since there's no surname). To have a tiny piece of immortality.

In a way that's fair, because the outer relief carvings depict a pharaoh making an offering to Isis, but the pharaoh wasn't a pharaoh; it was Caesar depicted as one. Most of the cartouches around him just say 'pharaoh,' the book points out. Post-Egyptian conquest, he had a couple dozen temples strategically commissioned to honor local gods, this being one of them. For Isis. So whether he knew it or not Leonardo of 1860 was, apparently, part of a very long history of men inserting themselves where they don't belong.

When I share this thought with Leith, he smiles and says 'I like that, yes. Like Keats's Grecian urn,' and returns to skimming through a document on his laptop. 'He wrote about that.'

His eyes move very quickly over the page he's reading.

'Who?'

'Oh, sorry. Steven Redding. Wrote about Keats.'

I do remember that poem, vaguely. The gist: he sees an urn in a museum or something and is kind of lamenting death...yes, sees the urn, and realizes that all of

the figures on it are eternal. The man chasing his lover will continue the chase forever. A kind of immortality. Did Keats sense his own immortality when he wrote those words? An immortality of the same kind, carving his name into the artifact.

‘Would you carve your name into a temple, if there were no consequences?’ I whisper.

‘I don’t have that impulse, no.’

‘Ok but if you tasked yourself with leaving your mark in some way?’

He finally looks at me, and leans forward so I can hear. ‘I think my mark is the one all the people who *didn’t* carve into the walls left. I’d leave it as I found it, so others can see it for themselves, too.’

‘But at the cost of surrendering your sliver of immortality?’

He sighs so dramatically that the girl sitting across from him jumps and peers at him through round glasses that only intensify her deer-in-the-headlights look. She catches me watching her, and quickly returns her gaze to her screen. There is an orange sticker on her laptop: SYRACUSE.

The crows feet around Leith’s eyes tighten and he purses his lips to try to cover a smile. ‘You’re relentless.’

‘Never been accused of that before.’ A joyfulness wells up within me. Here is something I didn’t know about myself, something that I actually like. Relentless? Me?

‘Maybe my thumbprint in the dust on the roof,’ Leith says in barely a whisper. More like a breath.

‘Why the roof?’

He pauses. ‘I don’t know.’ He leans back toward the book he opened next to his laptop. It is full of pictures of gods, Isis and Osiris, and their son.

‘Why not the whole handprint?’

‘Overkill.’

He’s probably right. Bet they don’t dust the roof of the temple, at the Met.

Redding’s light eyes watch me from the dust jacket of the book Leith borrowed for himself, but isn’t reading.

Rush of affection. Leith really comes across as a wounded artist for whom, somehow, all things connect back to his father. I reach across him for the Redding book.

The entire back cover is a black and white photo of him, Steven Redding, sitting in a rocking chair, probably in his mid-fifties. He exudes a verve and an energy that you can see in his eyes: a foxlike expression, a quickness. He leans forward as though about to spring up from the chair. Inside the cover is the same photo but in color. That's odd. His eyes are a very pale blue. Light blue eyes have always freaked me out. There's something unsettling about them.

'You know, I used to have this bullshit native New Yorker thing where in the in the back of my mind it's still uncool to visit overtly touristy places,' Leith confesses in a whisper.

'I think I have a similar thing. But I guess to be fair, how is it in any way cool to live here and not take advantage of it?'

'You're right.' He's embarrassed and this makes me feel both guilty and annoyed. He changes the subject. 'But, um, the thing is, I don't think there's any book here that can help me. I'm not saying that to be an asshole, it's just that I think I already own every book there is on Redding. I inherited them.'

'No, that doesn't make you sound like an asshole.'

He says something that sounds like 'G—Well—I' before laughing helplessly. And now we're in one of those giddy loops where you're not supposed to laugh so everything is hilarious and now I'm laughing, too, astounded at him, his absurdity, and the shrugging, unasked question *Why are we here then, you idiot?* Snorting, rolling into quiet hysterics, and only able to lean on his arm and mouth *What the hell.* Syracuse with the glasses looks at us again, and we settle.

Leith holds his palms up in apology and blushes deeply.

We stay a moment in that afterglow of a fit of laughter. He doesn't lean away. 'It sounds stupid now,' he confesses, 'but I thought I should be here for atmosphere. I remembered you said you look for atmosphere when you're working on a film project, and it turns out that's something you have in common with Redding. He could only write in certain places. This being one.' He gestures toward the room, 'in the

Schwartzman building. My guess is he came here originally to do research, and found it was more than a place of answers. I wanted to come here to, you know, feel him here.'

A sobering thought. Looking down at the photo of Redding again, his expression hasn't changed. Still ready to spring from his chair.

'You wanted to come to the Schwartzman building to feel Steven Redding here.'

'Yes.'

'With me.' Ooh, that was bold, wasn't it?

'Ah, well, yes. I mean, I thought you'd get your own thing out of it. This is part of our aim, I mean, right? Be in college again, get a head start on spring semester? Rejoin the living?'

'Yeah.' By contemplating the dead in a gilded library?

There's nothing else to say, so I just smile at him. *Your* aim, not mine. *Your* aim to carry on your father's work. I don't have anyone's work to carry on, just a yawning void to escape or accept.

With Leith, escape seems vaguely possible. That is a good reason to be here. I can understand it, the attraction to that hush of library and study. Other people in the pursuit of understanding. I can feel an undercurrent of inspiration here. A silent, moving river. I can see him in full color, Redding, reading and writing, wispy blonde hair slightly fucked up in that genius way it always is in pictures, like this one, as though he'd just swept into a room through a windy doorway. Redding, scribbling madly in the research room, the hiss and scrape of pens and pencils, pages curling from the pressure.

Leith looks toward the readers, too, but like me, he sees something else. 'He called it a church, this place,' he says.

'It makes me think of cathedrals,' I confess, but only because of Dolly, piously going week after week, covering her hair like it was still the 50s. Sharp twist of guilt that I didn't mourn her properly. I couldn't. *Can't*. Ava has seen to that, too. And Steve, in his own way.

I'm not calling you back, that's what I wrote last, four days ago, to Steve. I need space, I'd said to Ava. She's busy without me now anyway. How can I forgive anything with you breathing down my neck? I can't even smile without feeling like a freak.

I ask Leith if Redding was a Catholic at the same time he asks if I'm ok. I pretend I didn't hear him so we can move on.

'Yes. Well, no. He was raised Catholic, I think, but he couldn't reconcile faith with his idea of reality. I think a lot of people can relate to that. I'm Jewish, I've never had a reason to be in a church, but I remember being a kid and going with my parents to Temple, and there was this hushed and sacred feeling around where the Torah was kept. It's got to be the same feeling.'

I find myself nodding, wanting to tell him about my near-total total inability to fool myself in that way, but knowing what something sacred feels like. But instead Ava is here. Because that was the real turnoff wasn't it? The final straw. Realizing that Ava and the rest of them needed to perform, to seem a certain way, and I don't need to say the answer to every mystery is supernatural. 'Ava —my mother—' Leith nods, *go on*, 'She was raised Catholic. My grandmother was Spanish, you know, super Catholic. And Ava did stuff performatively, I think but now she's... in her grief, she's been so...'

Leith nods. No one really knows what to say about Ava.

'Yeah. Anyway, I haven't been inside many cathedrals. The Catholic church near us in Detroit was more like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room. Florescent lighting, grey carpet, navy blue plastic chairs with metal legs. Depressing.'

'Yes.'

'But cathedrals ...that's the one thing Catholics did right. They understood that the architecture had to be profound. It had to feel like a castle, like heaven. It had to be a visual reminder of what remained to be won. Like Redding, they understood the effect of atmosphere. It's everything. The one Dolly —uh my grandma, went to was like that. She used to make us go when we visited her. I hated it, the nuns especially scared the hell out me. I hated it except for the achitecture.'

'In Spain?'

'I wish. In Pittsburgh, before she moved in with us. She left Spain when she was sixteen.'

A mental note seems to have been made, but he doesn't pursue it. 'Vaulted ceilings,' he said instead.

'Old stone.'

'Votive candles.'

'Echoing quiet.'

The long pause. We're not looking at each other. The pause is long enough to compulsively move the image of Steven writing from the research room into a cathedral, alone, papers rattling and pen scratching in the deep shadows and dim light. Leith gives a nasally hurumph of a laugh. If we are not on the same wavelength, we are parallel.

'Do you want to go to one?' Leith asks. Perhaps not exactly the same wavelength. 'A Catholic one,' he says. His eyes sparkle a little, Freshman with a fake ID.

'Um, no.'

'It could be fun.'

'It will not be in any way fun.'

'Redding describes having a kind of nostalgia for it, even after he was officially gone from the faith. Missing something that isn't real. —I think I know the feeling,' he clarifies. He plays with his wedding ring, which I treat like a scar —never ask about it and never will, unless he brings it up— still loose on his hand.

I've never missed the feeling of being in church. No mystery, no hush of the presence of an ancient force. Just a waste of an otherwise beautiful space.

'My dad felt that way,' he continues, 'though I think toward the end politics became his religion. Understandable,' Leith confesses, and it is a confession, because it's clear to me now that he is still in a place that threatens to overwhelm with grief at any moment. Everything connects back to irrevocable loss. Am I so quickly on the other side of that?

Obviously, watching a grandparent die is different from watching a parent die. Flush of heat from my chest to my face as the memory of Dolly, the last one, her crumpled and dead-looking face suddenly huge on my phone screen because the nurse held her own phone too close, returns unsumoned. 'She can hear you,' the nurse says

again. Meant to be kind but felt Orwellian, a sick lie, that sweet woman's camera work like a German Expressionist, exaggerating this death through close-up —*look at it, look at it, you must.*

This is what waits for me when I'm not present for what's directly in front of me. The heat threatens to become actual nausea so I sigh it away.

Leith has lowered his head slightly and fumbles with his messenger bag. His hair is long enough to cover his eyes when he leans down. This research project isn't about Redding, and it's barely about getting ahead for next semester. He sits back upright, now pen in hand.

'Leith,' I say. 'This is a cathedral. People built it. If you're looking for your dad through Redding, they're here. You'll find them both here.'

He looks at me for a long moment. It's a big look. Then he says 'I hope so.'
And we go back to work.

I don't understand what he wants from me. But I do want to help him.

On the acknowledgements page of Redding's biography is a long list of names, places, and societies that helped with the research. But the first thank you goes to 'the Steven Redding estate and Ms. Holly Taylor.'

So I open my laptop, dust be damned, and Google "'Steven Redding" and "Holly Taylor.'" Website after website mention her. Under images, there are photos of groups of people, Redding now recognizable to me. I select one that looks like it came from a newspaper. The tiny caption beneath the photo is just legible, but only mentions names. Holly, whichever one she is, is listed as 'Dr. Holly Taylor Schwartz.'

'Redding's wife,' I say to Leith.

'Was Ivy.'

'Ivy what.'

He searches his memory a moment. 'Ivy Taylor,' he says. 'Don't know her middle name.'

Oh, oh, oh. His sister-in-law. Holly and Ivy. What kind of monsters do that with their children's names?

So Holly must help handle Redding's estate. In honor of her sister, who was married to him.

A Google search for 'Dr. Holly Schwartz' has many results for a psychiatrist by that name. A psychiatrist based in Brooklyn.

The photo I found is dated 1975. If the people are named in correct order, Holly is the third from the right. Her face is bright and ambiguous thanks to the quality of the photo. I find others and get better at marking her. Short dark hair, which seems unfashionable for the time, and rather dramatic dimples.

Now, searching Dr. Holly Schwartz and finding her photo, she's clearly in her 70s, but there's no mistaking beneath thick glasses and still short (though now grey) hair, the Shirley Temple dimples. Very kind looking, but also no nonsense. Her eyes don't say much else.

In my excitement, I click on her profile on a database of therapists she's in. 'There are moments in every person's life when we can feel overwhelmed with challenges. In such moments, we can benefit from a confidential and supportive environment where we can resolve challenges and cope with our experiences. While there is nothing magic about therapy, it does help us understand who we are, and determine what we will do with our lives. The trust given to me is sacred, and earned, I hope, by the extraordinary individuals who have touched me in my 30 years of service in psychiatry and psychotherapy.' Beneath this statement is her contact info and a list of insurances she accepts, along with a banner that says she's accepting patients and will give a free consultation. Steve's insurance is on the list.

Scrolling back through other profiles, nearly every one starts with the word 'I.' Holly is special.

Leith is too engrossed in his own work to see what I'm doing. Who knows, maybe he knows Holly well. His father certainly would have known who she was, if not met her. It's selfish, but I'm not going to share my discovery with him. Not yet. Because she sounds like someone I'd like to talk to.

When we're leaving, we walk together toward 53rd street, but he takes my arm and keeps pulling toward 5th. 'If this is to see the tree at Rockefeller, I've seen it,' I warn. 'I know you're a native, but I was living here a year before lockdown. I've ticked the big boxes—'

‘Not the tree.’

We’re smack in front of the cathedral before I realize what he’s doing. St. Patrick’s Cathedral, its gothic spires dark and imposing against the clear, cold night. Two doors are open. No music pours forth from them. I plant my feet to get him to stop. ‘No.’

‘What, are you going to burst into flames?’ he grins. ‘Let’s just peek inside.’

Normally inside this strange woundedness I either feel too much or not at all, a relentless sadness. It doesn’t press in the way fear does. It *pulls*. But now it pulls me down so far that I’m outside of myself, I’m buried in the frozen soil under this pavement, trying to scream. If I could cry, I would. If I could be afraid, I would be. I grab his arm, harder than I meant to, and he draws a breath. So much more well-adjusted than I am.

‘My roommates are out of town tonight.’ Just for the hell of it, Nikki had agreed to go with Ben and his family up to Burlington to visit his brother, and the thought of being there alone is chilling. ‘So, if you would like to feel someone else’s pain...’

And the way that he looks at me, I know the answer before he says it.

Then a fumbling blur —mouths, trains, keys, clothes, again. A look that blooms from *can I* to a real, quiet joy. No pain, nothing so creative, just... wet and lovely and secret. A nice present to stay inside, though, drifting into a sleep that promises to be sweet and safe. Such a rare gift, this.

‘She wasn’t evacuated from Spain, your grandmother.’ Voice in the dark. Might as well have thrown a bucket of water on me. ‘The... during the civil war then, I mean? No, she was a teenager you said.’

An attempt at gracefully turning away is thwarted by his fingers tangled in my hair, necessitating an awkward joint effort —‘Sorry,’— before I’m able to answer. ‘She was a little kid during that war. It was the next war that made her leave. She never really talked about that.’ I gather all my hair to one side so it doesn’t tangle again.

‘You never asked?’

‘If someone doesn’t want to talk about something, I tend not to bring it up.’
This isn’t true, exactly, but it’s enough to quiet him. His hand is hot on my shoulder.
After a few minutes comes the steady breathing of someone who doesn’t have to think
about how to fall asleep, each exhalation tickling the back of my neck.

8.

RAMÓN

JULY, 1936

‘Never trust someone who says “common social destiny,” Ramón.’

‘I won’t.’

Papá used the phrase ‘revolutionary jargon’ a lot. If Ramón wanted to imitate him, that’s what he would say. Common social destiny was a good new one to throw in.

‘An authoritarian, conservative movement masquerading as a liberation for the underclass,’ he said to El Ruso, who shook his head. Sitting on the hard step outside the bakery, the words moved around Ramón, like the wind murmuring through the shutters at night. They were the only ones outside today.

Mamá appeared —the women who drank tinto and talked had stopped coming over — and made them all go inside.

There were more interesting things to think about.

The last couple nights had been loud. You could hear men shouting, pops and cracks like fireworks exploding and echoing down the long streets, mingling with the rare but fearsome pounding on doors.

This night had been so quiet until, in the stillest, most silent hour, a woman screamed five times. It woke Ramón from his sleep like a bucket of water thrown onto him. It left him shivering and gasping, the sound and the rhythm of the screams echoing over and over in his mind.

Marianita hadn’t stirred. No sound came from his parents’ room. He fetched a glass of water from the pitcher in the front room and his hand shook like Papá’s when he lifted it to his mouth. His teeth chattered on the glass but the night air was still and warm.

He went to the window and knelt by the sill, tucking a curtain behind his head so he could peek over the ledge out into the street. It was horribly quiet. No one went out. Had he dreamt it?

When he felt large hot tears roll down his face, he knew he hadn't. Knowing he was a child and feeling sorry for himself for being frightened, he climbed back into bed and curled himself into such a tight ball that by morning, waking with the lingering feeling of bad dreams he couldn't remember, he had to unfurl himself, his muscles resisting. He fancied this must be what a pillbug must feel like after curling into a hard ball for so long, to finally stretch out again and walk and move its limbs freely. He fancied it must be what Papá felt, only Papá sometimes couldn't unfold.

Ramón found himself wondering if perhaps it had been a gitana who had been screaming and his parents exchanged a look before telling him everything was fine. Was that why no one went to the rescue? He wondered about the gitanas, knowing now they didn't have a castle to go home to but instead slept near the bridge where he was no longer allowed to go.

There were many things he wasn't allowed to do anymore.

All at once, he stopped seeing Alonso outside of the altar boy classes they attended with other boys from school because they were required to go directly home afterward. Then Mamá took to meeting him outside the iron gates that squeaked in the slightest breeze. She wasn't alone. Other parents started doing it, too. They stood shoulder to shoulder with looks too dark to read.

The waiting parents hardly spoke to one another but stood more or less together, united like fearsome angels at the gates of heaven. They walked home with their children. And the children were quieter, too.

Walking home with Mamá in the beginning was exciting. As Marianita chattered away, running ahead, jumping over cracks in the road, Ramón felt a chance to show Mamá some of his favourite things: the perfect circle stone in the road, for one. It was cemented in among the cobblestones but it was dark, and very flat, and perfectly round. It was fun to look at, like a secret eye spying on you.

'Don't say such things!' Mamá hissed, looking around as though someone could jump out at any moment.

So Ramón focused on other interesting things, things she would be likelier to enjoy, like the curl of the sign above a business shop of some sort, the metal curlicue connected to the little bell that would briskly jingle whenever someone opened or

closed the door. Aside from a small comment here or there, Mamá did not want to talk much, and the excitement that came from the prospect of walking home with her, of showing her new things, wore away within a few days.

In the second week, a gitana Ramón recognized passed them in the street, walking uphill, in the opposite direction. To Mamá's horror, she paused to greet Ramón with a flourishing, sweeping gesture that was half curtsy, half bow. Ramón grinned at her and thought of the word "regal," felt the grace of it for the first time in another person in a simple grey dress. Not a princess. He burned to ask her if they were still staying under the bridge, if they were safe, did she hear the screams in the night? But this was impossible, not least because Mamá yanked him by the elbow and, blessing herself, doubled their pace down the street toward home, barking at Marianita to keep up.

'The devil is everywhere,' she said.

At home, Papá was restless. He and Mamá had another quick, hissing conversation. Their voices were low and angry. Talking like that took more of Papá's energy than anything else, and when he caught Ramón's eye, part of him seemed to cross the room, move toward his son, without his ever having risen from the sofa.

'Enough now, I want to see my little hyenas,' Papá said, and Ramón and Marianita clambered onto the sofa to sit beside him. Marianita sat next to Papá and Ramón sat on the other side of her. When Papá put his arm around her, he looked even thinner, and his arm seemed to rest across Marianita's shoulders like a dry branch: stiff and nearly weightless.

His eyes told a different story, however, and soon, he did, too. One Ramón had never heard before.

'When I was a boy, I went to school where you go now, but the nuns who taught me were different. They were old even when I was a boy. And when I was about your age, Ramón, Sister Justice became our teacher.

'She came from a different parish, and you could tell just by looking at her they must have been glad to be rid of her. Her skin was like tree bark, and she spent so many years scowling, her lips got stuck like that, puckered as a cat's asshole.

‘Paolo!’ Mamá shouted as Papá squinted his eyes and pursed his lips to demonstrate as Ramón and his sister lurched forward to hide their laughing faces in their hands.

From between his fingers, Ramón could see his mamá smirking in spite of herself. He wanted to keep looking at her like that, to see her from between the shadowy frames of his fingers, bright-eyed and smiling at his father from where she sat in her chair, vivid against the cream coloured walls that looked yellow in the lamplight. Her hair had come a bit loose from her bun. Seeing her like this was like seeing her through the stone archways of a courtyard Ramón had never been to. When she smiled, he realized he looked like her.

‘Oh come on,’ Papá said. ‘Your mamá went to the same school! Tell them. What was she like?’

The children sat up, looking at her. She shrugged her shoulders and said ‘She was mean as a snake.’

‘Mean as a snake!’ Papá roared. ‘Oh, she would bop you about the head with an eraser for the slightest thing: shirt untucked, daydreaming, secretly reading a book under the desk. I can’t tell you how many times she made me do lines...

‘She was also the craziest person I knew. She thought cats —*all* cats, not just the black ones— were in league with the devil. If she caught you eating a fig, she’d make you spit out the very bite you had in your mouth and throw the rest away, all because Jesus cursed a fig tree—*once*, I would add, *one time*, and only because *he wanted to eat a fig* and the tree didn’t produce any edible ones. But if you tried to explain it was just the one tree that had been the problem, and that the Christ had no personal vendetta against *every* fig tree for all time, an eraser would materialize out of thin air and *pin! Pan! Pin!* Your eyes would be streaming with tears and your head would be enveloped in a cloud of chalk dust faster than you could say “Hail Mary.”

‘Anyway, one day, at dismissal time, she was on the verge of letting us go when something just beyond where we sat at our desks caught her eye. Something near the door.

‘We all swiveled in our seats and turned as she stopped talking mid-sentence and marched between our desks straight over to the doorway. Something small and

dark lay on the floor there. I couldn't see what it was from where I sat, so, knowing I'd get into trouble if I left my desk, I stood on my chair to get a better view instead. Then everyone else did, too.

'Well, we didn't know it yet, but it was a black cross. A homemade one, easily something one of the kids could have made without thinking much from a couple charred pieces of wood from God-knows-where. Could've been a thousand places. And when she said, in her booming voice of justice, "Who fashioned this devilry?" she wheeled around to face us, wimple whipping behind her with a jerk of her head, and leapt back in fear. We must have been quite a disturbing sight, all standing on our chairs and staring at her like a weird coterie of prairie dogs. She put both her hands over her heart.

'Of course, no one would have owned up to making a piece of devilry. It turned out that, for Sister Justice, black crosses went into the same box as figs and cats. They were evil. And it was quite a conundrum because, according to Sister, you mustn't lift a black cross, lest you be cursed. So do you know what she did?'

From the corner of his eye, Ramón saw Marianita shake her head as he did.

'She stood with one foot on either side of it, far apart as she could get her two feet to be while still standing upright, and one by one she made us take her hand at a jump, so she could swing us through the air to safety. And that was how we left the classroom that day. Whipped by Sister Justice over the small black cross that any of us could just as easily have stepped over without breaking our normal stride. But she didn't want to take any chances. I half believe, had we been on the ground floor and not the first, that she would have made us all climb out of the window.

'It's great fun imagining her trying to get rid of it. Used a broom to sweep it into the rubbish, probably, but what if it's also evil to throw away a cross? Anyway, that was the day I realized something.

'I realized the world is secretly full of black crosses everywhere you look. Tree branches, certain shadows, every time you write the letter "t," every time you read it, cracks in the pavement, even the thin, thin lines in the pads of your palms when your hands are dirty, why, right there...' Papá gestured to the kitchen table, and sure

enough, the crossbeams cast a weird shadow on the ground in the shape of a distinct dark cross. The table suddenly became a waiting, sinister thing to Ramón.

‘There are black crosses everywhere, once you know how to see them. But so are green crosses. You can find them in blades of grass. At night they will look black, but could that make them curse you if you tread on them? The realization I had was, if all you’re looking for are bad omens, all you will find are bad omens.

‘This family has known the history of Spain. We have borne witness to it, participated in it, always. And these times we’re living in...you may not understand really, but we are in a big moment in history. I can feel the eyes of future generations upon us. I don’t yet know what they will see when they look at this time. But I fear it isn’t good.

‘I don’t believe all the things Sister Justice believed. Most of the time, I’m not sure I believe in much of anything. But I do believe that no one should suffer because of their religion.’

Mamá’s chair creaked a little as she shifted in her seat, and Ramón was startled to see she had tears in her eyes. Wordlessly, she stood and removed Marianita from under Papá’s arm, which plopped limp as a dead fish onto the cushion where Marianita had sat. She made Ramón go to bed and when he closed his bedroom door behind him, he leant down to watch her through the keyhole as she swung Papá’s arm over her shoulder, and helped him stand.

The next morning, Ramón helped El Ruso prepare the dough. El Ruso had sanitized the kitchen well before Ramón was awake. The bread was different now, smelled different, and there was less and less of it every day, it seemed. Why didn’t other people want to buy it anymore, Ramón wondered. No one came to the restaurant at all anymore. In fact, El Ruso didn’t bake for any of the restaurants anymore. Everyone ate at home nowadays.

El Ruso often had dinner with Ramón and his family, and brought things like flour and millet. He and Mamá planted a garden that took up most of the roof, which mainly El Ruso tended though he could hear Mamá’s lighter steps climbing to the

attic, and started to learn the different noises from different areas on the roof. He was not allowed up there.

That morning, Papá was meant to go with El Ruso to buy some chickens but he had even more trouble than usual getting out of bed. Standing at last, he tried to use both hands to drag his left foot forward, which now seemed to want to lag heavily behind as though leaden. When Ramón handed El Ruso the note from Mamá, El Ruso read it and then gave Ramón a long stare. Ramón supposed, in the end, it probably was only a couple of seconds. But no person had ever given him a look like the one El Ruso just had. He seemed very angry and very afraid and for one wild moment Ramón worried he had upset the baker somehow.

‘Tell your mamá I’ll take Monteguillo with me instead. We’ll settle up later. You’ll remember to tell her, won’t you?’

‘Yes.’

El Ruso gave him the odd look again, but he spoke so gently that Ramón knew he was not in trouble with the man. He understood that the look did not mean anger. It was worse. It was something more like fear. Kind of like Papá when he saw a large spider, only it wasn’t funny.

9.

HAIDEILIA
NOVEMBER, 2022

After Leith leaves, I try Holly Taylor-Schwartz.

But when I hold my thumb above the 'voice call' button, I start to shake. Something starts to overheat inside my stomach so I pull my ancient wood desk chair toward where I stand, in the middle of my bedroom and sit down, listening for the familiar wooden popping sounds it always makes, but I feel electric and shaky all over, like my voltage is too high. I'm going to throw up. I could. The trash can, which I emptied yesterday, is nearest to me. Cylindrical and made of shiny black plastic, it is too big to fit under the tap in the sink, so it would take forever to clean.

Forget that.

I let my thumb touch the 'Voice Call' option, and after two rings a powerful wave of nausea washes over me and I hang up again, throwing my phone on to the bed before launching myself down the hallway, touching the walls for support, to the bathroom. The heat rises unbearably, and the floor pitches and rolls as I move forward.

I slam the toilet seat back, it whacks the porcelain tank with a sound like a gunshot and I dry heave, tears stinging my eyes. My left hand managed to grab most of my hair away from my face, though several odd curly strands dangle in front of me, obscuring the view. I come close twice, but don't actually vomit. Can't even do that right.

What the hell was that? I can't even make a phone call now?

In the mirror I see the dark rings around my eyes, my hair all over the place, the smeared makeup around my wet eyes. I do my best to clean up and slink back to my room, lock the door, and lay down. It can't even be 5pm yet and I'm suddenly exhausted to the point of feeling a heaviness in my limbs and I try to focus only on the heaviness, stopping my blood where it is and letting gravity pull it down toward the mattress, anchoring me here.

Too much. It's too much.

Through my eyes, a flash of light. A bright day at the river and Ava is instructing us on how to build a sand castle. She can't really help because her arms are still bandaged. She holds them out on either side of her. Jared and I pack wet sand into pails.

The phone is ringing. I try to find it without opening my eyes and realize I'm laying on top of it. Sitting up to retrieve it from where it was nestled in the small of my back is an unpleasant jolt back into wakefulness.

The screen says Holly Taylor-Schwartz.

Zip of energy and I sit up straight, readying my voice to sound alert and not like I've been sleeping in the middle of the afternoon.

'Hello?'

'Hi, this is Dr. Schwartz. I believe I missed a call from this number.' her voice sounds older and sure.

I stammer my way through an explanation and to my horror, she has time in the afternoon.

'And do you know how to get to me? Are you in Brooklyn?'

'I know how to get to Brooklyn...' I put a hand to my forehead. Who doesn't know how to get to Brooklyn? I sound like a five-year-old.

She doesn't balk and gives me directions from the 7th Avenue station and tells me to bring my ID and insurance card and that's that. The consultation is free, but if she takes me on, then she'll go through one of my parents' insurance, hence the cards. 'I look forward to meeting you,' she says, and it sounds authentic.

'Thanks, likewise.'

Her tone was kind, but matter-of-fact. No bullshit.

But of course, this isn't just for me. It's also for Leith. Maybe I can get her to talk about Redding, somehow.

Holly Schwartz. MD. I will tell her I want to be able to sleep properly again. To think of my family without feeling sick. And to make sure Steve can't find out I'm doing this, since I'm listed on his insurance as a dependent. Would he panic, maybe call Ava, who would then use that as an excuse to insist I pull out of school and come stay with her until I fix what's wrong with me (and what if this is who I am now, and it's less a matter of fixing and more a question of adjusting to a constant, shifting spectrum of agony)?

The building isn't a building at all but a brownstone on an idyllic Brooklyn corner at the end of a long row of uniquely pretty brownstones. There is no sign on the front of the building. Potted blue plants on either side. Must be fake, surviving weather this cold, but removing a glove to touch one, they're real. The small petal feels like velvet between my fingers.

Fine dark stone steps lead up to the front door. Bell on the side, perfectly round and pearlescent like the inside of a shell.

The people on this street must know what this place is. Holly and a bunch of other psychotherapists run their own private practices out of here. Is there a vicious old lady across the street, stroking a cat and peeking through the curtains with binoculars at the head cases coming and going all day, guessing their diagnoses? 'Ooh, Felix, look at the state of that old t-shirt, and *he's talking to himself*, mmhmm, schizophrenic.

'Ah, yes, there's the depressed goth girl, is it Tuesday already? Bang on time, too, that one. No one else will listen to her.

'And Mr AA, former all-American, you can tell by the shoulders... But no more wedding ring, oh, dear. Oh, dear, dear, dear.'

And then she comes to me. What would she say about me? 'A new one, Felix, observe! Hmm... Sad. Sad hipster girl. The Tortured Artist. She's a long way from home, isn't she?'

Holly told me to come right in when I get here, don't ring the bell. Her office would be immediately on the left, waiting room and toilet just past this, around the corner to the left. 'Wait if doors to my office are closed,' she texted. 'I only close the

doors when I'm in session. If that is the case, please wait in the waiting room. I will come fetch you.'

But there is no time to breeze past the double wood doors to her office and gather myself in the waiting room. Her doors are open already. A sign on the wall asks visitors to make sure both doors are firmly shut—the front door and the storm door. I take my time doing that, pressing my palm flat against the frame each time as though checking it won't spring open. The smell and the atmosphere of the place hit me: sun-warmed wood and dust and a comforting, lived-in feeling—the doors to her office are wide open. Brief glimpse inside as I turn to close the doors, just a swirl of atmospheric light and color, before I turn away to make sure the door is closed tightly. There is a small wooden board with tags mounted on the wall, circular dog tags, a column of names and a single tag on a single hook beside each name. They all say 'IN' or 'OUT.' H. Schwartz. IN. Door open.

Before I even step over the threshold I know I won't be able to tell her the truth, to try to put things into words. She'll see enough to know I'm worth taking on, and I won't be able to call her back.

It'd be better to have an assessment, Sami had said, better to know. That way I could take something that could help me sleep better. No more spiders crawling down the ceiling, or talking to myself in a terrible half-sleep.

The mere idea of having to go into a pharmacy to pick up medication like that, to look someone in the eye and go through the whole awkward exchange makes my heart race. It's irrational—most people I know are on meds for *something*. But it doesn't change how I feel. It's humiliating.

I could have smoked half a fucking blunt and I still wouldn't feel any different. I pause at the threshold of her office and she looks up at me from her notebook.

She is the same, a shrewd expression, but not an unkind one. Silver, curly hair that goes just past her ears. Glasses. Autumn sky blue eyes. All black garb, but tasteful, the kind of clothing you'd expect people who work at museums to wear, but

she also wears a colorful beaded necklace and reddish-brown mules. Has her own style. I think of Ben's comment about my high school sweatshirts and smile.

'It's great to meet you in person!' she says, gesturing for me to come in to her office. She's much shorter than I'd expected, but otherwise exactly the same as her photo online. 'Please, come all the way in.'

The space is cozy and the ceilings are high. Like Burroughs, she has papers all over her desk. They're orderly, but stacked high. A bookcase on the opposite wall is equally packed with neat binders, hard bound textbooks, and one section that's a bit more colorful. Fiction, maybe?

The floor is littered with Turkish rugs and a framed Rothko print on the wall. Just one, and it's huge, dominating the space between two bookshelves.

'Oh,' I say, stupidly, and point at it.

Blood red, ochre, and black laid over a bright, bright red. Separate from each other but only as elements of a landscapes are separate, lending a civility to the chaos, like you've shown it the worst, the very worst, what no surgeon could fix and you can see the glint of it reflected back at you as it says 'I know.' A comfort of a kind.

'I'm fond of that one.' Holly waits for me to sit down before putting her back to me to close the doors.

'I hope you don't mind me saying your hair is really just gorgeous.' She closes the door.

'Thank you. And thanks for meeting with me on such short notice.'

She pushes up her glasses to scratch at her eye and says 'Before we start today, I have to ask you something.' She points to a small crate in the corner. An animal carrier. 'Our building had to have an exterminator come, so I had to bring my dog in with me today. Would you be comfortable if he's out of his crate? He'll just want to greet you, and then he'll calm down.'

This is just like Sami's therapy dog.

'Oh, yes, of course,' I say, posting up on the large reading chair that's furthest away from her desk.

A black and white bolt of lightning shoots out of the carrier when Sami unzips it and runs around in two small, joyful circles, before leaping into my lap, heavier than it looks.

Okay, not like Sami's calm therapy dog.

'Brutus, *platz*,' Holly says, and the dog pays her no attention. His ears stand straight up, and two black patches of hair cover each of his mellow brown eyes, between which is a white streak of hair that goes down his muzzle and around his mouth, which seems to be smiling as he sniffs at my hair and tries to lick my face. I hold him off, but he's so determined, it makes me laugh. He puts his white paws on my arm and chest, trying to climb up. 'Brutus, settle,' she strides over, and gently pulls him back. 'Gentle, be gentle.' She pets his back.

'Hey Brutus,' I say, and pat his head. He struggles with the desire to jump back up again, but controls himself, eventually jumping off of me with Holy's guidance. 'I randomly ran into another dog called Brutus yesterday.'

'I admit as names go it was uninventive. We thought we were being funny. A name like that doesn't suit a terrier.'

She offers me mint tea and switches on an electric kettle on the end table beside the chair opposite mine. It fires up instantly while Brutus brings me a braided green chew toy, dancing in place with excitement. He pushes it into my hand. I take it and toss it in the air, hoping that's what I'm meant to do, and he catches it.

'Nice catch!' Holly says and claps. She points at a dog bed in the corner of the room. '*Platz*.' This seems to satisfy him, and he lays down and begins gnawing on it. 'He'll be chill from here on, promise,' she says, handing me a steaming forest green mug with a mint sachet floating in the hot water. 'He's beyond training. Thank you, for being so patient.'

'Oh, no problem.'

On paper I would have thought it an inappropriately happy environment for this, but it's more emboldening, somehow.

Holly sits in the comfortable arm chair after handing me the tea.

‘Well, Haideilia,’ she sighs a little as she settles into her chair, ‘I skimmed the letter from your therapist about evaluating you for an official diagnosis, but I’d rather start with you telling me why you’re here.’

‘Oh, so, Sami’s a LMSW; she can’t prescribe.’

‘No, no, no, I know that. I want to hear about why you went to Sami in the first place.’

Before I can back out, I launch immediately into my explanation. I don’t bother with the stupid video I made. Almost breathlessly, we go over the Ava stuff, and I manage not to cry but tell her I’m starting to panic in crowds or at random.

‘Oh, and late at night, when I’m trying to sleep. I’ll get tired and then I’m suddenly awake and scared.’

‘Does it feel like you’re going to die, when this happens?’

‘Yeah, kind of, like my heart might give out. It’s kind of like a physical pain.’ I try to follow the line between the ochre and the black on the Rothko. ‘I don’t want to sit around and just talk at you about my problems. I want to *do* something about this. And I have to ask you right now what the cost for this is, because I’m still on my father’s insurance, and I don’t understand how it’ll work with copays and all of that. I didn’t want him to know.’

Her glasses flash in the soft light from the lamp beside me when she nods. This is what they mean when they say ‘fiercely intelligent.’ It’s almost cold, almost intimidating violence, but there is genuine kindness in her. It’s a difficult combination to pull off, and difficult to say how exactly she is conveying this dual ferocity and kindness, but she is. Like I found a battle-hardened warrior who wants to be on my side. She holds up a hand. She wears a beaded bracelet similar to her necklace. ‘First of all, this round is on me. Since you’re concerned, who’s your insurance?’

I tell her.

‘Ok, I do have to warn you I’m dropping them at the end of the year.’ She stands to take my offered insurance card with both hands, formally, like they do in business in East Asian businesswoman and walks over to a small printer to make a copy of it anyway. To do this, she turns her back to me. So she doesn’t think I’m crazy.

I thought people in psychiatry were more cautious about things like that. ‘I’m not doing anything with this yet,’ she says over her shoulder. ‘And just because you’re out of network doesn’t necessarily mean they won’t pay me.’

‘Oh.’ I should have thought all of this through.

In the ensuing non-conversation that follows in which she negotiates the copier, I take a closer look around. There are two well-worn ottomans in front of the couch, which I know already I’ll never have the nerve to rest my feet upon. There is a small second door that opens up to a tiny porch outside, barely visible through the white curtains that hang over the window. It’s full of potted trees and flowers. A mini greenhouse?

And there! On the shelf of one of the bookcases flanking the Rothko print, nestled nonchalantly among various psychology books and guides to self affirmation or coping or grief: *Selected Poetry of Steven Redding*. And books of photographs. One of the same coffee table book Burroughs owns, and — get out — photos of a young Redding, three young women, and a young man in what looks like London. I’ll be goddamned. It’s really her.

She turns back, returns the card. ‘But I’m also a socialist.’

I look her in the eye. Clever blue. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I mean I think we should just figure out what you can pay me that’s fair to you, if insurance won’t do anything. But we can talk about that later.’ She sits.

‘Okay.’ That doesn’t sound promising. What do psychiatrists think is ‘fair’ to be paid in New York? ‘Um. There’s another thing, another anxiety thing I have that if I don’t tell you now, I’m nervous I never will.’

‘Shoot.’

‘Alright. This is a new thing, never happened to me before this year. But some nights, I’ll fall asleep, and I’ll sort of dream that I wake up just in time to see a spider crawling down the wall to me. And then I open my eyes for real, but I still see it. So I turn over in bed and punch the wall, to kill it before it gets down to me, but nothing’s there. Once I’m fully awake, I can see that. But it’s so real in my half-dreaming. I’m afraid it’s a sign I’m going insane. In normal waking hours, I would never punch a

wall. Or a spider. I'm afraid of them. And I lied to you earlier when I said I think Ava's ok now. My mother's never ok; that's part of her personality.'

She nods, and it's a confident, reassuring nod. She's not shocked. 'First of all, the symptoms you're describing in a totally sane way are symptoms of someone who is under a lot of stress. This is not how insanity presents. That is how *extreme stress* can present. Secondly, experiencing hallucinations when you're waking up or falling asleep and under duress is not unusual. It's so normal that they've been given a name: hypnogogic hallucinations.'

'Hypnogogic.'

'Yep. It refers to that state between sleep and wakefulness, and when we're stressed, all sorts of fun things can happen there. In other words,' she crosses her legs and leans forward a little, 'given what you've mentioned about your stress level, that reaction is not out of the norm.' She allows a moment of silence for me to take that in.

'Now. I believe that in addition to good physical health, there are three key reasons why, circumstantial, people come to see me. Those are work, perhaps in your case school, friends and/or family, and love—romance. Walk me through these three. Begin wherever you like.'

From nowhere, the distinct image of those chiseled names in the stone of the temple. LORENZO, the lower half of a small idol of Isis beyond. Stone legs, the barest suggestion of a feminine V, and a navel.

Leith's back to all of that, facing me. Our hunt for Ramón, which is a hunt for his father. An escape. Our strange, candid silences. Just looking at each other. My careful awareness of him at all times. The worry that he'll realize this is all a ruse, and I'm a distraction and he'll drop me.

I tell her little.

But Holly is a measurer of words and gestures. 'You know, being married does not somehow render you incapable of feeling things for other people.'

'He's not going to act on his feelings more than he already has. This means something else to him.' I can hear Sami's voice in my head. She'd tilt her head to one side in mock thoughtfulness and say 'Oh, we're mind readers today.'

Holly is gentler. 'What makes you think so?'

‘Actually, I don’t think so.’ I tell her about his project, omitting Redding’s name, and I tell her about the contagious, somersaulting humor, the strange sense of what the other is thinking or feeling, the way I can tell when he knows I’m looking at him while he’s looking away. ‘And he certainly didn’t need to involve me quite so intimately in this memorial project for his father. He’s gone out of his way more than once to spend time alone. But then nothing. It’s like being in love with someone who’s in love with you sometimes.’

Holly nods again, and takes a breath between her teeth. ‘Well. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, usually,’ she says. A relief like actual warmth or a hug spreads through me and it’s validation—that’s exactly the thing. I need the feeling and the experience to be validated. ‘But what’s in it for you?’

‘What, me?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Um...’ There are many reasons to like Leith. Focus on honesty. ‘I think the main reason is because I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. And I was starting to think I wasn’t able to feel anything like this. So loving Leith...’ Well, it’s true, isn’t it? It is love, of a kind. ‘Loving him is a relief. It’s a relief to just be happy with someone, even if it comes with a little pain in knowing they’ve chosen someone else already. It stops the noise for a while.’

Where Sami accepted this, Helen pushes. ‘So you haven’t been in any other relationships?’

‘I have. Just not ones that meant something like this one does.’ She doesn’t say anything in response to this, forcing me to explain. ‘I think...I’m going to sound like the biggest asshole, but I think I date down. Like, I think I date guys that I know are kind of dumb or not going to be that invested. I want to be swept off my feet, but I make it very hard for anyone to do that.’

‘Hearing you say that makes me wonder if maybe you feel this way about Leith because he’s a safe place for you to feel it. You don’t have date down, and you think you can love him without taking on the risk of being all in if you think you can’t really have a relationship with him.’

I have to look away from her.

Nikki, braver than me in all things, once pointed out a girl walking through the quad. She was on the basketball team and looked it: tall, sporty, kind of imposing. 'I asked her out,' Nikki said, 'I debated doing it for months, and I finally did it. But she doesn't know she's gay. I mean she's aware, but she doesn't *know*.' We watched her as she walked through the quad, glancing at Nikki, then away. Nikki's expression was resigned and hopeful at the same time.

'But the way this stuff works is,' Holly continues, 'you're never truly safe. Because if you have feelings and you think you can't communicate them or act on them, and if you see him acting on his feelings toward someone else like his fiancée, that can wind up hurting you.'

I'm nodding along like a crazy person. Yes, yes, yes. 'I think I'm about there, Holly. I feel sick every time he even mentions her name. It's like our time together is this safe bubble where it's just us and the rest of the world is the rest of the world. I try to create those all the time.'

'Makes sense to me. Haideilia, I'd like to take you on, again' she says. 'Let's see what insurance has to say, and we can go from there. Same time next week work for you?'

'Yes! But can I ask you if you have any instructions for me? Anything I can do to work on my anxiety?'

She tells me to stick with Sami's breath work. She and I will cover the diagnostic part, questions like this are part of the intake. 'Focus on where your agency is,' she says. 'Focus on what you can do.'

Before I go I casually ask about the Redding photo.

'Oh, yes,' she says, turning to look at it and smiling. 'Good eye. A lifetime ago. My sister married him. That's her, next to him. Believe it or not, that's me, next to her.'

The two women look alike, but I wouldn't have guessed one of them was standing in front of me.

I thank her and am out the door in no time, stroking the blue flowers again as I go, hoping they manage to keep lasting through the season, or that Holly has a way of cycling them in and out of the greenhouse.

As if her ears were ringing, my phone buzzes and of course it's Ava. Exercise agency.

'Ava, can I call you back? I'm about to get on the train.'

She pauses before she says 'Yup, sure, hopefully I'll be able to pick up. Very busy with work; we have an event coming up. I was just taking a quick break to say hello.'

'Hello. Are you ok?'

'Yes, but you know you could call me and check in.'

'I'll try you again when I'm out of the subway and if I don't reach you, we'll try again later. Gotta run. Love you, bye.'

And I hang up before she can. I hang up before she can keep me waiting to see whether or not she's too busy to say I love you.

10.

In seminar, Burroughs kicks off on another ‘why art’ jag, having taken the bait when Soo-yun said she sometimes felt foolish because both of her parents are cardiac surgeons, and here she is, ‘learning how to film things.’

‘I’ve had heart surgery,’ he says. ‘What’s the point of restarting a heart, though, if you’re coming back to a miserable world?’

Silence. Here we go. If Steve were here, he would use his classic baseball terminology: ‘Here comes the wind-up...’

‘What are the best moments of your life? They’re happy, right? They’re not the moments you were unconscious and being cut open. They’re the best days, the funniest friends, the moments life swept in and restored your faith in people when it was waning. Right?’

‘So why do people get heart surgery? I’ll tell you why I did.’

And here Steve would say ‘Here comes the pitch...’

After a pause, Burroughs continues. He’d probably be a little pissed off I’m telling you this, but what the hell. Many moons ago —decades— my brother Mike came out to visit me, and we attended a social function together. And at this social function, a special kind of... confectionary was passed around. Not something you can’t buy at the grocery store. Also something considerably stronger than what I wager you all often smoke. In fact, this wasn’t something you smoked, this was something you *dropped*. Yes?

‘So Mike had never partaken before in the consumption of this substance and he wound up maybe having more than any reasonable person reasonably should. I realized way too late that he had overdone it, but I did my due diligence, right? I got him out of there and figured we’d just walk home. Like a good brother, I steered the conversation away from anything that might cause him to question any deeply held beliefs about the universe. But there was no way I could protect him from what happened on this walk.

‘We’re not far from my place, it’s summer, it’s warm, the streetlights are on and it’s late, but it’s New York. We come to an intersection, and for his sake I cross the street when the signal tells me to, like a good citizen. But when I turn to say

something to Mike once I think we're safely across, I realize he isn't there. I turn around, and see he's still on the other side of the street, and not only that, he is staring heavenward in what I can only describe as hopeless desperation, tears streaming down his face.

'I run back across the street. "What's happening, Mikey?" I ask.

"Look!" he is nearing hysterics and point at the streetlight overhead. "What are we going to do! We can't leave them!"

"What, who? Leave who?"

"Them!" He gestures wildly toward the streetlight. He's so worked up he's practically hopping up and down. All I can see up there is a bunch of moths and insects flying around the light in the way you'd expect them to.

'So I try to see beyond the streetlight, half in terror that there will be a flaming plane descending from the sky, but no. Mike is talking about the moths.

"The baby seagulls, those poor baby seagulls!" he says. "They're trapped up there, they don't understand, and they're going to die!" Cue uncontrollable sobbing. People are staring now. Some of them have also stopped to look up at the moths. Excuse me, the baby seagulls.

'And while I found Mikey's strange empathy both inspiring and hilarious, for me the best part of the night was the lengths I had to go to in order to avoid or keep him distracted from the countless flocks of lost baby seagulls amassed beneath every streetlight. I never appreciated how many streetlights there are in New York before that night. That probably reveals a considerable amount of male privilege.

'Years later, two years ago, actually, it happened that I did have to have heart surgery. They used a saw to cut through my breast bone and they pulled it right out my chest. I've been made to understand that it was in a bowl beside me at one point, something I dearly wish I had a picture of. My point is, who would bother with any of what your parents have to offer if we didn't have connections, these other things to live for? Life and then art and then life again can give us that.'

That scene with his brother is in one of his early films, I'll have to look up which one it was. I'm sure I saw that, almost word-for-word. Did he pull from memory to create it, or is he just remembering a scene he wrote?

Later, in his office, I tell him I started kicking around the idea of writing a scene based on the Temple of Dendur, about the people who chiseled their names on it millennia after it was built, but centuries ago. ‘But I worry I only like the *idea* of writing about the 18th Century tagging at The Temple. What fuels the Western desire to make and own the rest of the world, to possess history, ‘discover’ other people, claim from them, claim them? Why would the thought be, upon visiting or finding a forgotten place, to put your name on it? I think that’s important.’

‘Why are they looking for it in the first place?’ Burroughs asks. He’s not expecting a specific answer.

‘Entitlement, for one. And a need to connect with the past (even if it’s not your ancestral past), or to connect with people? To understand? It makes me spiral out, like if you feel it’s okay to write your name on something sacred to someone else... it’s different from someone tagging a corporate building.’

‘Why?’

‘Because one is about entitlement and the other is about reclamation, I think.’

‘Ok. Reclaiming what?’

‘Everything. This is what I mean by spiraling. How do you own *land*? How do you “own” anything? Shareholders own other people’s labor.’

‘So tagging a temple is owning it.’

‘Mmmm. Owning is too passive. Tagging the temple is controlling it, controlling the narrative about it.

‘So maybe I could investigate two possibilities: One is about entitlement and the other is about reclamation. There is a case for the latter, because in zooming in the pictures I took of the engravings, there are some that have no surnames. Just ‘LEONARDO 1820.’ Or just an initial and a surname. ‘DGALLON.’ A desire to *possess* wouldn’t end up so lackadaisical about the details as to risk anonymity —what’s so hard about chiseling a few extra letters, so no mistakes are made about your identity? LEONARDO who? It’s not like today, like they thought they’d get in trouble for doing it and kept it anonymous for that reason. Or only want some people to recognize their tag.’ I sigh. ‘I don’t know why I decided to write about this.’

Burroughs is good at letting thoughts play out. He isn't really observant of it in a conscious way, because he falls into his own thought patterns, too. From the corner of my eye I notice I'm jiggling my leg up and down. When I stop, he looks up.

It is clear from the expectant look in his eyes that he already has a theory formulated, he can already articulate it, and half of him wants to. But he'll leave it to me to figure it out or not.

'You're thinking something disparaging about Gen Z,' I guess.

His laugh is a bark. 'I don't have the right.'

Burroughs swivels in his chair to look at his computer screen and quotes from the script I sent. '*Pan to close-up* of Leonardo's rough right hand, tracing the letters of his name, newly carved into the wall.' He glances at me as though to check if I'm following along, then continues. '*Slowly pan out* from Leonardo's name. He is no longer there. Instead, a young man in modern clothing points to the name, holds a smile, and looks at a fixed point off camera. *Pan ninety degrees* to show a young woman taking a photo he is posing for.

'The lighting is brighter now. The man breaks his pose and walks over to her, and they look at the digital image in her camera. They converse in Italian as they walk into the temple and out of sight.

'*Dolly back* from Temple to reveal it is present day Met. Visitors bustle about. *Dolly back* to stairs where a young man writes on the stairs, foregrounding the temple. *Pedestal down*. He faces the camera but looks downward at what he writes. He pauses to look up from his writing camera right, toward a natural light source, silently mouthing something to himself.'

He looks at me and gets a shrug in return. 'Yeah I really hate this assignment.'

'Why did we go there? Don't answer that. *Where* are we going from there?'

I shrug. 'Into the writing, maybe.'

'Ok, I was curious, too. And what's he writing?'

'Carrying on his late father's research into a late postmodernist poet.'

His expression is grave, and he looks at me for five long seconds before asking his next question. 'Why is his back to the temple? What's more interesting in that notebook than 5,000 years of history?'

‘Grief. Building a temple of your own.’

Another silence until finally Burroughs says, ‘Your *own*. So not just tagging one.’ He lets it land. ‘So where’s the temple with Haideilia on it? Hold on,’ he gets up, walks around the desk, and leaves, also leaving the door open. He knocks on someone’s office door further down the hall, exchanges a quick word, and comes back with a coffee table-size art book. He flips through it, guiding the door closed behind him with a foot.

‘What is it with you and oversized books?’

‘Shh. This is actually Jane’s.’ He scans the table of contents, and then flips to a page toward the back. ‘Ok, speaking of the Met... they acquired a work by this artist,’ he holds up the title page of a chapter: CLARA PEETERS. ‘At the start of the pandemonium. She painted at the height of the Dutch Renaissance. They got a still life, a bouquet, and it’s not out yet. Doesn’t matter. This is what I wanted to show you.’ He flips forward a few pages and hands me the open book.

Covering nearly the entirety of two pages is a still life of a table in a darkened room. It is a banquet table. A tiered cheese plate holds enormous, unevenly sliced wheels of cheese. The jagged cuts are visible, like you could run your finger along their soft edges and bits would crumble away. Beside it, a plate of almonds in a blue and white dish with neat, distinct Chinese calligraphy patterns around its edge, with some of the almonds scattered onto the table and catching the light. The detail is so exquisite that the striations on the almonds and the folds and the way the light folds into the dimples of the dates. Beside them, a polished silver knife glints, its blade facing away from the table, and next to it, something difficult to make sense of visually. One tan oblong shape stacked on top of another so you can see they are baked and rigid. Behind the almonds is a terracotta jug next to a glass decanter half full of amber liquid.

More than a dozen textures, and all of them photo-real. Although I can’t profess to know much of Dutch masters, this one is almost like a photograph, except it doesn’t have to fixate on one point, and blur out the rest. It feels everything. The color, the light, but also the differences between the organic and the inorganic. The

graduated color differences near the hard rinds of the cheese. I could run my finger over the ridged designs in the glass decanter.

‘Look at the knife,’ Burroughs says. It’s polished pewter, with an intricate design on the handle, like flowers and oh.

◇ *CLARA* ◇ *PEETERS* ◇

Engraved in its side. All caps. Bold as anything. Her signature.

‘Her name,’ I breathe.

‘Yes. *And, and*, if you look closer, you’ll see there’s a self portrait in here.’

Somehow, at that suggestion, as though I knew it was already there, I see her. In the silver lid of the terracotta jug, a partial reflection of a woman above and below the space where the lid opens when the handle is depressed. She’s wearing a white cap of some sort, features indistinct in the reflection, exactly right. Exactly as they would have been when she was painting it.

When my voice comes back I say ‘Her face in the silver, and her name on the knife.’ This is the woman I saw at the Met. This deathless woman. ‘Can I borrow this?’

11.

RAMÓN
AUGUST, 1936

As the months wore on, more and more soldiers came into town. Some were like Tomás. Others, it was hard to say if they were good or bad because the bad side was bad but the good side had also done very bad things like stealing the clergy out of the churches. For a time Mamá and Papá couldn't agree on anything, and that was interesting because for once it was not only Papá who had a lot to say.

'How dare you,' Mamá said. She seemed to tower above Papá now, who stayed in his chair, glaring up at her with dark, sunken eyes. 'How dare you say to me, after Hugo, after everything that has happened...' she spat, but seeing Ramón was watching, walked away and closed the door to their bedroom. Ramón wasn't sure if he could really hear her quick prayers and the rattling of the rosary beads or if he imagined it, but either way he knew it was happening behind the dark wooden door.

Instead of winking at Ramón and leaning in to let his son in on a secret, or a story, Papá held the fingers of his right hand in his left, and stared at them. It made him look old. Weak. Ramón knew he would fall asleep in the chair, so he gave him a kiss on the head and asked if he could go across to visit El Ruso and see if he needed help with anything. Papá nodded, then reached into his pocket for a note for Ramón to pass to El Ruso. He turned his head away.

Ramón was quick to leave.

El Ruso was the same as always —maybe even a little louder. Lately he and Monteguillo, who were normally very generous with their own rations, had begun pooling them. They were working on a cuaderno of recipes to help others cook with rations and few resources. Papá sent them many ideas and notes, and they wrote back through Ramón.

They had made friends with a couple antifacistas from England who said they would help make the cuadernos and give them out all over the neighborhood. So far they had figured out how to make an omlette with no eggs, and certain creative rice dishes. They had recommendations for stretching a tin of sardines across multiple

meals. The main goal was to make a single dish that could feed a person with no side dishes.

Another good thing about the antifacistas was they would sometimes give out their own rations on the sly. The Republicans did this, too, but it was never enough. No matter who the rations came from, there was never enough and as far as taste went, they were always too much of something: too salty, too dry, too chewy, too hard, too lumpy. Not all of it was bad, it just wasn't right.

When Ramón walked into El Ruso's bakery that day, it was just in time to watch Monteguillo bend his long body over a pan of hot oil and drop an orange peel into it. Ramón was sure it was an orange peel because the smell of citrus was stronger than any grove Ramón had visited, and with none of the sweetness of the blossoms. It was like being inside of an orange. A burning orange.

Both men were very serious. Monteguillo was frowning as they watched the sizzling peel.

El Ruso saw Ramón first. 'Welcome to our laboratory,' he said, gesturing around in a grand way, like a king. Monteguillo smiled and waved him over, using his foot to slide the small step stool El Ruso kept for Ramón next to him so Ramón could climb up and see.

In a shallow pool of oil, the orange peel bubbled and fizzed. Monteguillo turned it over with a fork, showing the newly browned skin. Beside the pan was an oily plate of small, browned pieces of orange peel. El Ruso gestured for Ramón to try one.

'They're salted,' he said. 'They taste sort of like potato crisps.'

Ramón tried one. It did not taste like a potato crisp. The outside was salty and burned and the inside was still soft and chewy. It was like chewing on wood. Ramón gnawed and gnawed at it, but the burned orange peel never shrank.

'Here, go spit it out over there,' El Ruso jerked his head toward the bin.

'That plate is nothing but failed attempts,' Monteguillo explained. 'See, there are several things we have to get right: a thin peel—very thin, we must use a sharp paring knife, like this one—and the right oil temperature, and the right timing, and the right amount of salt.'

‘I still think we should go back to coating it,’ El Ruso said. ‘small bit of oil, little flour, maybe water as well, and salt it afterwards.’

‘I know,’ Monteguillo pursed his lips at the orange peel in the oil, then used the fork to set it on the plate. One of his curls had fallen over his forehead, and he swept it back with his hand. ‘But if there’s a way to do it without flour, that would be better. To tell people this is an option.’

Ramón was not so sure it would ever be possible to turn an orange peel into a potato crisp. Someone would have thought of that by now. But Mamá had been telling him again and again lately that it is not safe to just blurt out whatever you are thinking. It’s a strange time and people are under stress. So Ramón thought carefully before asking ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘For the cuaderno!’ Monteguillo smiled at him. ‘We have the main courses. Everything is a main course. But sometimes you want a little something special, right? Something different. So we’re trying to come up with a few ideas that people can try.’

‘Let’s try it again with the flour,’ El Ruso said. ‘We can try to water it down, make a thick paste that you can paint on. Keep the slices thin. Hm?’ He looked at Monteguillo’s nose and then his eyes.

Monteguillo popped the latest chip into his mouth and sighed. ‘Alright,’ and he strode over to the bin to spit out the peel. ‘The other recipes are much better, Ramón,’ he said. ‘You tried a few, remember? You liked the stuffed tomatoes.’

That was true. The tomatoes had anchovies and boiled eggs in them, which was strange, but it was pulpy and seasoned well, with oiled millet bread on top, which didn’t taste so bad once it had been roasted. Ramón could make that dish on his own now.

Monteguillo turned the stove off and El Ruso stepped around him to prepare the flour paste for the next round. Ramón watched as Monteguillo took an orange from a basket on the back wall and used the short, sharp paring knife to slice thin strips of skin off. ‘How are your parents?’ he asked, without looking up from the orange.

One of the reasons Ramón liked Monteguillo was that, like El Ruso, he didn’t talk to him like he was a little kid. And unlike El Ruso, he was always gentle when he

asked questions. Ramón wasn't sure how to answer this, however. He didn't feel like thinking through a reply. 'They argue,' he said, 'about who is good and who isn't. Papá is very sick but we aren't allowed to talk about it at home.'

'What's the matter with Papá?' Monteguillo asked. El Ruso coughed.

'His strength leaves him like sand draining through an hour glass,' Ramón said, quoting Papá. 'After a time, he can flip the hour glass over and have strength again. But it's longer and longer in between. I don't think he can go down the stairs anymore.' This last part had never been uttered aloud, not only by Ramón, but in his presence. And even though it was he himself who had said it, the words were a shock, and he felt a painful sting in his eyes.

Monteguillo stopped the knife work and looked at him. His eyes were very big and very bright. They could easily show great happiness or great sadness, the way a dog's can. 'I am sorry,' he said, and laid a hand on Ramón's shoulder.

El Ruso coughed again, and Ramón looked away from Monteguillo. Inside, he felt like a small, whimpering animal, like a baby squirrel in an empty nest in a tree, lost and wanting his father. It was a very sad thought, and it made his throat tighten.

'Ramón, which do you want to do, help Monteguillo with the orange peels, or help me paint and fry them?' El Ruso asked.

Grateful for the distraction, Ramón worked in silence with the men for awhile, until finally some of the new salted test crisps were cool enough to taste. 'Ramón should try it first,' El Ruso said.

'Yes, let's have the sous chef try it first,' Monteguillo agreed. 'You can check for poison and make sure it's safe for the rest of us to eat.' He winked.

Ramón had the crisp in his mouth, was on the brink of telling them it was much better than the other way: still weird, but not unpleasant, salty and crunchy and orange-y, when the door opened. Suspended in his mouth these contrasting flavors, batter and orange, as an English antifascista walked in.

The man was rather shorter than Guillermo and El Ruso, and had very short brown hair and watery, bloodshot blue eyes which looked big behind his round eyeglasses. He was pink in the face as though from running but he wasn't out of breath. He had the kind of shy, bookish look of kids who got beat up in school.

Ramón looked to El Ruso and Guillermo, but both men simply stared at the antifascista.

‘Good day,’ the man said.

El Ruso simply nodded at him.

The man spoke in a strange way. ‘I have to ask about your progress. When the notebook is ready, we are prepared to produce and give it. Also, I think maybe I can help. I was a chef—I *am* a chef—in England.’ The man touched a hand to his eyeglasses, almost like he was tipping a hat.

‘We will only need help making the cuadernos and distributing them to the people,’ El Ruso said. Ramón looked at Guillermo and wondered if he found it funny too, that neither of these men were speaking their first language, but Guillermo was looking only at El Ruso. ‘Two chefs familiar with local cuisine should be quite enough.’

‘I understand, yes, of course,’ the man said, practically bowing.

‘How long have you been here?’ Monteguillo asked.

‘Since yesterday,’ the man said, then added ‘From England.’

Monteguillo nodded and his eyes flitted playfully to El Ruso for a split second.

‘Well. We need another day or two before the first cuaderno is ready.’

‘*Oneortwo?*’ the man asked, blinking. Then, comprehending, said ‘Ah! Yes. Good, good. In two days, I return.’

El Ruso’s face did not show great welcome or great dislike when he asked ‘Would you help with something else?’ his speech was slower than Monteguillo’s, which seemed to make it easier for the man to understand.

‘Yes, of course. What can I do?’

El Ruso pointed at Ramón. ‘You can go with this boy to his parents. They live across the street. His father is sick, and his mother needs help with supplies.’

‘Sick? We have doctors, too, I can—’

‘Doctor later. For now, see if there is something you can do to help. In the house. Please.’

‘Do you know what they need?’

‘The Señora will explain.’

And before Ramón knew it, he was leading the strange man across the street, feeling embarrassed because Mamá and Papá didn't need any help and besides, Mamá was upset and Papá was sleeping. He had seen Mamá yell at El Ruso before, for using foul language in front of the children. During the walk back across the street, which seemed to take forever, Ramón imagined that would happen again as soon as the strange man was out of the house.

Mamá's face went completely pale when she saw the antifascista, who introduced himself as Tomás and explained that El Ruso had sent him. Ramón was half convinced she would send the man away on the spot, but she didn't. With a smile that looked pained, she beckoned the man to come in and led him up the stairs. She walked very slowly.

Ramón and Marianita were sent to Marianita's bedroom. Before closing the door, Mamá told them she would fetch them when they were allowed to come back out. Ramón felt outside of himself: everything was so strange now that he couldn't do or say any of the things that he normally would, like protest, or turn the doorknob with painstaking slowness, listening to every tiny creak, so he wouldn't give himself away as he opened it a crack to eavesdrop. He knew already the grown ups would speak too quietly for him to hear. And instead of feeling angry, he felt tired and rather like spending the rest of the afternoon with El Ruso and Monteguillo, where at least he would be doing something.

Every once in a while, Papá's voice could be heard. He said words like 'outrageous,' and 'meddlesome' and, surprisingly, 'rebel bullshit.' Each outburst was followed equally by harsh-sounding words from Mamá and then quiet, more soothing-sounding words.

Marianita's room was a pale pink color that Ramón deeply disliked, and it was also much smaller than his own room. Mamá hadn't placed them in his bedroom because it was much closer to the kitchen, and she knew all Ramón would have to do was listen hard at the door to hear them, or peek up at them from the space between the bottom of the door and the floor.

Marianita, of course, never cared. She never seemed to notice or mind and was content to sing made up songs to herself, or to try to get Ramón to see the same shapes that she saw in the patterns of the thick wooden floorboards. They lined up their heels against one wall, and walked heel to toe to the far wall to measure how many paces long her room was.

Finally, he heard noises coming from their parents' bedroom, which shared a wall with Marianita's. Ramón opened the door and peeked out at them.

Tomás was fixing Papá's rope that he used to pull himself out of bed as Mamá watched. He tied large knots in the rope, so there would be more handholds for Papá to inch his way up instead of the single haul he normally had to do. Then, using tools from Papá's bag, he removed the door from the frame, and measured the gaping space. Ramón closed the door as quietly as he could, although he sensed it wouldn't matter anymore if he had stood there and stared.

Over the next couple days, a couple of antifascistas came back with Tomás. The first was a doctor to examine Papá, and the next was some kind of carpenter. They gave Papá a wheelchair, which Papá let Ramón and Marianita play in until Ramón crashed into a table with his sister in his lap, and upon hearing Marianita's wails, Mamá flew into the room and said no more or they would break it.

The doctor was a serious man. Even when he smiled, his eyes were frowning. He had Papá do all sorts of things: stand on one leg, see if he could do it without shaking (he could not), grab his arm as hard as he could. He also took his temperature and listened to his heart, and when Ramón saw that he had to look away because it reminded him of a time when Papá could still lift him up and he could lean against him and listen to his heart. Ramón didn't lean against him anymore because he could feel Papá's skeleton and it was frightening.

Tomás was handy. He fixed tables and chairs, and helped remove doorframes and adjust Papá's wheelchair so it could fit more easily into different rooms. Papá could still stand and walk on his own, but more and more often he had to pull and drag his legs, one after another, because his will alone was no longer enough. There

were no more good days when his strength came back to him in full. He was so thin, but when he moved, you would think he was moving a sackful of bricks.

12.

HAIDEILIA
NOVEMBER, 2022

Nikki's biggest show yet tonight, opening for a band whose name I've already forgotten because I'm awful. Dragging sense of dread for how rowdy a Friday crowd will be.

Leith says he's still in, though he's been more distant. Cautious. Starting sentences with weird phrases like 'Well, my friend.'

And Holly, having me do a grueling series of 'assessments' which included replaying everything I hate talking about the most, asks me to wait while she steps outside to take a call on her emergency line, a mobile phone she carries around with her at all times.

No Brutus today.

I stand up and stretch, walk back over to the photo of Redding, Ivy, Holly, and two mystery people. The man on the far right has dark hair. He's squinting like he's trying to read a sign off in the distance.

The papers on Holly's desk are personal. Letters, academic studies, but mainly what seem to be personal correspondences. She did mention she prints her emails out. The one sitting on top of the pile has a few dates scribbled on top of it in Holly's hand.

The email begins with 'Dearest Holly.' Not the sort of thing a client would have written. But then a name catches my eye.

'13 November 2022 - Steven would have been 94 today!'

A quick Google search for Redding reveals that yes, his birthday was the 13th. Last Saturday. Screw it. I pick it up.

Dearest Holly,

I am typing today!

Woke up with pain in my back from spending so many days allowing the rain to keep me inside.

I wish it made me angry, but nothing does anymore. When I was young I had an unmined anger that I now miss. All that primed anger, never properly set off or considered, settling instead into a kind of youthful vitality, an adolescent thrumming in my dumb muscles powering my ambition to —what?

I think I miss the anger now. I think it has gone out forever and that's one part of my long mortality gone. Now, far too often, I find myself marking time to mark time.

Today I left without telling Vita where I was going. She wasn't in yet and I could have written a note. I didn't. I was too excited to see Elias. Did he tell you his band is coming to New York next month? They are doing so well.

The orderly at the front desk didn't stop me leaving. He said '¿Qué onda, güey?' which confused me greatly the first time, but now I like it. Güey meaning ox. Dude. What's up, dude?

I drove this creaky skeleton to Leslie's old café since it's not too far. I read my letters and emails there. Vita prints them for me.

The café that replaced Leslie's is nothing like the original. No soft linen on its square tables. But the food is good and I like being there during the morning rush.

Well. Today my mail was rather dull except for a shimmery red envelope from America, from my old adopted city of New York (where else?) and I knew it was from you.

Holly I had your letter open when a ripple went through the café. I looked at the young lady next to me, and she looked toward the door, recognition dawning in her eyes.

Your nephew, my godson, Elias, still in the concert garb, can you imagine! With his fellows. It scared *me*. Dressed like devils, their faces still painted silver, black

and white, and two of them have entirely black eyes, no whites at all. And he with those terrible contact lenses, undead-looking, glowing blue, spotted me and sat down at my table.

Sensation. Two 'selfies' taken. I have to admit, while I never understood it, every time I see him dressed like this, I have to give Elias credit. They are fascinating to look at. With the garb, I think he's recognisable now.

If she could see me now, I can only imagine what my mother would say. She'd be kissing her medal of St. Joseph and whispering a Hail Mary with true Catholic fervor.

He came straight over from a show (an after-party?) to visit me and Vita, who apparently can tell where I am with my mobile, told him where to find me. I told him I thought he was the devil. When you get to be this old, you start expecting him.

I showed him the envelope with your letter, and he reached for it immediately, but didn't read it. How he loves you!

He remains gregarious as ever. He told me about the show next month and suggested we make a little pilgrimage of it. I think I will. I will call you when he sends me the details.

I left the café so happy, Holly. Your letter glowed in my hand like a red ember.

Love,

RS

I put the email back down, heart pounding. No way. RS?

When Holly comes back she starts going over the assessment but I'm only half-present for it. She hands me a blister pack, a sample pack, with instructions. The feeling of shakiness has returned, like I might be sick. Or need to be moving, running away, doing something that isn't this.

13.

A crowd of intimidating people loiter outside the venue. Ben groans like he was hoping for something different. Leith hasn't shown up yet.

Other pedestrians step into the street instead of threading through the crowd of people where they stand on the pavement. We do not attract odd looks, and it isn't long before Ben manages to find Nikki's friend, who lets us in through a side entrance. That turns a few heads.

Ben often tells Nikki her bandmates look like murderers. That isn't wrong in the stereotypical sense of what a murderer could look like, I guess: straggly long hair, tattoos with generally dark subject matter, anger rolling off of them. But Nikki's bandmates are nice in person. They just look like people you wouldn't want to mess with.

'No one "looks" like a murderer,' Nikki would point out. 'That's how people get murdered. You can't always tell.'

'Ah but you're forgetting about the people who don't get murdered because they *can* tell what a murderer looks like.'

Inside, Nikki's friend disappears almost immediately. We only have moments before the main doors are opened, so we hurry to find a good place to stand. Near the stage but not too close.

The space is large and dark, with a raised stage in the front, bar in the back complete with many hanging inverted crosses (Ava would have a rage stroke), and a ceiling lower than it looks like it should be. It's going to get hot. We walk across the sticky floor, making our way to the side of the room, keeping toward the back. We only move forward toward the stage if the crowd is thin, but tonight it looks like it won't be. Normally, standing in the front near the stage is reserved for people with a serious amount of aggression to blow off.

People start awkwardly filing in and taking places close to the stage or close to the bar. The middle section is left empty for now.

I pull out my phone and message Nikki.

Nikki Jones 🌸👊

We're here

killa

Break a leg, mama!

break a chair MOTHERS

fuckin amped

are people in yet? how do they
seem

‘How is she?’ Ben reads over my shoulder, and then joins me in scanning the people filing in. For some reason, there don’t seem to be as many people in here as there were outside, but it’s a fairly good size and people funnel in in a steady stream of two or three at a time. A relief, really, a little less claustrophobic. And way more diverse than the other venues. A thick girl with a tattoo of a snake on her shaved head passes me. Her shirt says BLACK GIRL METAL

‘What should I tell her?’ I ask Ben. He scans the crowd, gestures for me to hand over the phone, and texts back.

Ready. 🤘🤘🤘🤘
Delivered

Then he takes a selfie of us pulling fierce faces, and sends it to her. The image shows the chaotic bar area behind us, so she can also see there’s a good number of people coming in. That’s a big deal, because plenty of people will skip an opener.

‘Now that’s settled,’ he says, reaching into his back pocket, ‘I’m going to grab drinks.’ He makes his way back toward the bar, and I stand shoulder width apart so it’ll be easier to make space for him when he comes back.

It’s definitely more a goth vibe than metal, but then again, I wouldn’t know, exactly, how to differentiate the aesthetics. The walls are painted a deep vermillion, probably recently, given how pristine they appear compared to the scuffed black floor. Certain spots are brighter than others where an attempt was made to clean them with something astringent.

Still nothing from Leith. He did say he was going to be late. I text him where we’re standing so he’ll know how to find us when he gets here. I won’t hear the phone if he arrives once the music has started.

Everyone here is with someone, and people like me, people who are standing alone and waiting for the ones they're meant to be with, mostly look at their phones because it feels less lonely. Burroughs asked that once of the class, at the start of the year: 'Can anyone explain to me why you need to be distracted all of the time?' I never thought of using the phone as a distraction before that, but he's right. It's a talisman against loneliness (or fear of being perceived as being lonely) and real contemplation.

Still, the temptation to just stare at my phone is strong, the idea of being seen as busy is comforting, like I'll be losing face or seen as pathetic if I'm caught just standing here, looking around. Fortunately, it buzzes. Nikki.

Nikki Jones 🌸👊

thanks!! means a lot you guys
are here. dont get murdered x

I go back to my email, where the link Leith promised to send earlier today (was it really only earlier today?) is waiting to be downloaded.

Scans of handwritten letters. Skimming through them, Redding's script is easy to spot. His handwriting is distinctive: decisive, loopy cursive that slants heavily to the right. Leith's father was probably meticulous enough to have it analyzed for authenticity. —Right? Probably. If he had the time before the end. His word alone wouldn't be able to verify, surely. Maybe he also had the handwriting analyzed for insight. Or is analyzing handwriting for personality information considered a pseudoscience?

The screen jerkily scrolls down much farther than I meant, a dramatic new quirk this phone has adopted, and the letters become a grey blur for a moment. Gently, I continue scrolling through the letters, sifting through Redding's scrawl.

Ben is nowhere to be seen, and during the time I was messing around, many, many more people have arrived, and it's already much hotter in here than it was before. The spiky knot of anxiety has moved up from my stomach and has its fingers around something delicate in my chest.

The ceiling is too low. If someone were to bust in now, like an active shooter or hold-up situation, the only way I'd know to get out is the way we came in, which at

this point would require passing a few dozen other people. Why didn't we stay closer to the door? Why didn't I look for another exit when I could?

I'm not tall enough to see over the heads of the people who are lined up in no particular order in front of the bar. I return to the screen in my hand, glowing with letters from a dead poet. I make it back to the top.

Christmas, 1998

We are alone this holiday and not unhappy. Against our better judgement, we have taken in an old cat. She is needy and affectionate. I found her in the garden, coincidentally, under the silvery vines that have been here since the day we moved in and did nothing much for close to a decade until this summer, when they bloomed with stunning blue flowers. They reminded me of your story about the baker who lived across from you, the "Russian," and the blue flowers he grew in a barrel, propogated from a gift from a gypsy woman. This is something I haven't allowed myself to dwell on for many years. Anyway I think the cat liked their vibrance against rest of the dead garden. She is intelligent.

She belonged to someone, Ivy says. She can tell from how friendly she is, but maybe she doesn't want to go home now. I made signs and half-heartedly posted them about the neighborhood but no (un)luck. At first I was afraid to name her because that would have been a stepping stone to attachment. But then six weeks went by and we were tired of calling her 'you' and 'hey' so instead settled on Iris. There's no story for it, other than we thought it suited her. Actually, what we call her doesn't make much difference to Iris.

She is that indeterminate breed they call moggies here. Orangish with tan and white stripes and eyes of a rather dull yellowy brown. On the whole unremarkable in appearance, but she enjoys being pet and curls up next to me or sits on my lap when I'm reading and she looks me in the eye when I talk to her. She is sitting on the floor beside my chair right now, as though guarding me. Every once in a while her tail flicks against my ankle.

The lights dim slowly until they're out. The world is dark and red and it's easy to feel more acutely than ever the heat and presence of many bodies around me. The ringing sound returns to my ears. It isn't feedback from a speaker.

Ben is suddenly next to me again, and waits for me to put my phone away before he hands me a bottle of beer (what kind, impossible to say). It is cold and hard in my hand, comforting maybe because I'm only so desperate for it to be. The new darkness also amplifies the mingled scent of beer and people. And heat. Now comes the low electric hum. The band must have come out, but I don't have a good window to see them. The crowd cheers, less lukewarm than I've ever seen. Someone nearby yells something aggressive-sounding, but I can't tell what he said.

Nikki makes a muffled intro, a little too close to the mic, impossible to discern over the crowd and the loud whining of a single note on one of the guitars until the drummer hits the cymbals four times, *ting! ting! ting! ting!* and Nikki screams 'Put your hands up!'

Then there is only noise and light and the shadows of people jumping up and down or just nodding along. Way more energy from the start than usual.

No sign of Leith, and now it will take him forever to find me now unless I text him. Why didn't I think to tell him where we are relative to the stage? Ben's profile in silhouette nods along to the beat and he takes a sip of his beer. His glasses reflect the manic light and moving bodies. The song is melodic and fast and loud. Emotive, but with lyrics I can't make out.

Nikki is a strong singer. This is one of the ones where she'll make a shrill, hawk-like shriek, and hold for a long time. I appreciate it's hard to do. But I love it when she actually just sings for real like this.

People press in more, and an invisible band constricts around my chest, and then moves up to my throat. I can't hear myself breathe over the music, which is so loud it turns my chest into an echo chamber for words I can't understand. The only relief to be had is to look straight up and take the deepest breaths possible—move against the band of pressure, fill the lungs bottom to top, try to breathe through the pressure, stay present for something different.

Nikki is beautiful in her element. Her long dark braids swing wildly about her when she jumps and dances. She leans in and gets low to make eye contact with someone toward the front and vibes with them, then goes inward, closing her eyes to concentrate, to feel. Then she rises and directs the energy outward again, prowling the stage. She looks so free.

It hits me that this is the biggest show she's ever done. Easily the biggest crowd, and easily the best one. Some of the people here know her music. The enormity of this, what it means to her, is so moving.

That makes the pressure in my throat worse. Relief doesn't last. Seconds after trying to breathe through it, the feeling comes right back. I look up at Ben just as he pushes his glasses up with the back of his hand to wipe at eye, smiling and so present like he's watching a friend get married. So proud of her that that he's *crying*.

Oh please me stay with this, let me just live through whatever this nervous attack is, and revel in the moment. The strange weak-kneed feeling that happened in the kitchen happens again, and I take a couple of staggering steps to try to keep my balance. Two people knock into me from different angles at the same time and now my breath is just gone. No one has noticed yet that I might faint, if anything, they'd just think I'm drunk. Unbearable, the thought of fainting here. What if no one notices and then things get rowdier and I just get trampled and Jesus I can't calm down.

Someone gets pushed into my shoulder from behind and shouts sorry in my ear. I have to get out of here or I'll suffocate. Door, door, door. Through the sea of people, movement and cursing, everyone going red and yellow and blue at the same time as the light. The colors become the air, heavy and hot.

A bouncer is at the side door and pushes it open for me. 'You good?'

Outside, it's quieter but not crisper. The world is muffled, like I'm wearing ear plugs. I take big, heaving breaths and start walking along the side of the building, hands on top of my head like I've been sprinting. Movement is good. At the end of the block, across the street, there is a park. Benches out front. So I start out for it.

'Are you ok?' A woman in her thirties with short blonde hair and baby blue eyes puts a gentle hand on my elbow. She looks sisterly. 'Are you asthmatic?'

'No. I'm ok.' And she moves on.

I jaywalk across the street, and take the first bench, no time to check for gum or mystery wet spots. Pool of halogen amber from the street light. Ok. Lean forward, palms on knees for stability, in-through-the nose-and-out-through-the-mouth. Seeing nothing but the pavement is a help. Rest of the world, gone.

I run a finger under both my eyes, and it comes back wet and speckled with black. I clean it up as best I can, but every time I wipe my eyes, it's like I never did. They're still wet. I can't stop crying. My heart thuds in my ears and makes my head ache.

A thought, sudden and strange and clearer than the rest, arises. *Call Steve*. It seems like the right answer. But I haven't talked to him, really talked, in months. Just texts here and there. Desire not predicated on a hope that he will listen or understand because even I don't understand, but there is a sense down here in the desperate drowning pool that he will talk to me about things that don't matter at all, meaningless, idle, dad-chat, and that will be something of a comfort.

He's there, in my phone contacts.

While Jared and I had custody time with him, we never stayed the night in his house, by choice. Hurtful. Awful. Why did we do that?

But I can't call yet, because I'm still crying. And then he'll call her, and she'll freak out and even get Jared involved in her hysteria, and we can't have that. The point is for Jared to never find her if she goes too far. But now he's the only one who would.

Breathing through the nose helps a little but it's hard to maintain and my heart can't slow down. Am I dying?

And that first time I let Steve pick me up from the airport and stayed at his house to my Ava's great, deeper-than-words woundedness, he was so happy. Happier than guilt could disperse, happier than I ever thought anything I did for him of my own love or volition could make him. He didn't park the car at the airport to save money; he circled and waited for me, and then I waited for him, and when he pulled up the curb, he jumped out wearing a Christmas sweater and no coat and a huge genuine, dopey grin. Real hug, big hug.

Are these hiccups, or are my lungs seizing up?

Totally present in conversation all the way to his house, *breathe in*, and then we talked for another hour over Irish coffee when we got to the house, *breathe out*. He wanted to know about my life in New York, he wanted to know (in). And in the back of my head the nagging feeling that this is how interested he'd always been interested (out); I had been the one who hadn't been interested.

When I told him I was tired from flying all day and went to lay down in the guest room, he waited thirty seconds before popping his head in to tell me he was making dinner. And another forty-five seconds to let me know the Lions were playing at 8pm, another minute to let me know towels and a washcloth were set aside for me in the bathroom. Sweet duality of annoyance at being interrupted when I was trying to sleep and feeling so deeply touched at his care and joy to have me there.

So maybe that's what I need. Maybe I just want someone to talk to me about how the Lions are doing this season and a bunch of other random, stupid shit. Not terrible news and judgement of my choices every time I pick up the phone. That's why most films include small talk. So you don't die.

Come on, heart.

'Haideilia?'

Rumplestiltskin name. Can't say 'Oh, sorry, I thought you meant *another* Haideilia.' It's hard to make out the finer details of his expression, but Leith is clearly shocked at my appearance. Not as shocked as I am at his, though.

'What's going on? Are you ok?' He jerks a thumb down the street. 'I was walking in and I thought I saw you fly out. Didn't you hear me calling for you?'

'No, nothing happened. I was just—' no sense in lying— 'it got kind of intense and I just, um... I don't know, I freaked out. I don't know.' The heat starts to rise again. Outside of me from nowhere, a shuddering, weepy breath jolts up my chest, and a constricting pressure builds at my throat, so I pull the neck of my shirt forward to relieve it. That helps a little, but no matter how deeply I try to breathe, there's not quite enough air.

Leith swings his messenger bag onto the pavement. After a bit of rummaging, he says 'Here.' He holds out a bottle of water but I can't take it. He sits down on the bench and puts a hand on my back. 'Alright, just breathe, you're ok.'

'I can't breathe.'

'You're breathing right now, I can see it.'

Leaning forward does help a lot. Isn't that what they discovered with COVID patients, early on? Flip them over so they can breathe better? I push back hard against the impulse to think about Dolly. Her face.

'Do you have medication with you, for panic?' he asks.

'No.' Just what Holly gave me a few hours ago, at home, in my bag with my writing and research and other coping mechanisms.

'Well, for whatever it's worth, they're quick. I've gotten them before. You're already past the worst of it.'

As if those words were magic, the invisible hand at my throat lets go., and I'm not hyperventilating.

I stay with another few breaths, then let go of the front of my shirt and sit back even though leaning forward is better. I completely stretched the collar out.

Leith takes his hand off my back. He sounded way calmer than he looks. His expression is so worried. 'Alright?'

'I'm sorry.' My voice, still thick from crying, sounds so pitiful, I almost start back up.

'You have nothing to be sorry about.' He sounds relieved to be in forgiving territory.

The ensuing silence is awkward, but I still don't trust myself to say more than a few words while my heart continues to slow back down. I don't want to wind up again.

'You get these?' I gesture to my chest and throat.

'When my dad was sick, I got them. And once after he died.'

'This little park, by the way, um, it uh, it actually reminds me of my dad,' he says. 'I go out of my way to walk past it.' Maybe this is just a place in the world where

people wind up thinking about their fathers. ‘He told me stories about how he and his friends used to come here and get completely stoned in college. —Stoned in broad daylight, can you imagine?’

I can look at him. He’s smiling at the thought of a twentysomething version of his dad getting stoned here. The vision almost shimmers in the street before us, but I can’t quite make it out.

‘And it wasn’t, like, weed or anything. It was opium—fucking *opium*, can you believe that?’ He laughs. ‘I was like, “Dad, who smokes *opium*?”’

I find my voice. ‘I dunno. It always made me think of East Asian drug dens or something. Graham Greene.’ He says the name at the same time as me.

‘Exactly!’ a quickening of delight moves through him. Again, that certain smile. Easy childhood, easy life smile. Parents who didn’t check out when things got too hard, because things were never hard. But that isn’t fair, is it, because my dad is alive and his isn’t.

‘Ava and I were watching some show together a couple of years ago, it was some daytime show, and they were talking about how this group of high school students had used LSD, and she turns to me and goes “I hope *you* never smoke that.”’

‘*What?*’ When he smiles, I can see his teeth are a little uneven, and it makes me feel better. ‘Can you smoke LSD? No. Right?’

Leith’s laugh is a rat-a-tat rhythm of *ha-ha-has*. ‘That’s great. She’s a trip. She kind of sounds like my mom. I mean, I’m pretty sure Mom knows the difference between LSD and weed, but she did get these weird ideas about how my sister and I spent our time in high school.’

I take another drink of water. ‘Those crazy kids.’

In a gravelly voice he does his best Brooklyn accent, ‘With their skateboards and their rock and roll music and their left-handed cigarettes.’

And isn’t it funny that this goofy nerd who pursued me—I didn’t go out of my way to become friends with him—who boosted my confidence by simple virtue of his careful attention, now has me in that jealous ache that should be a signal of ardent desire, not idle interest? It’s so rare to want, after all. It’s so rare to really want someone.

So what is it, relief? Relief to feel anger toward him because that can only come from deeper feeling? My lungs do the seizing thing again where I can't breathe except in shallow breaths and we have to stop at a corner to wait for me to get back to normal. He squeezes my arm.

When we get to my door, he wants to look me in the eye, but I can't do that. I thank him, and I don't glance back as I climb the stairs. All the lights are on. I sense he's still there as I unlock the door, but after I'm inside, I close the door without looking. I just can't face him.

In the bedroom, I keep the lights off.

I must have drifted because Ben's muffled voice at the door wakes me. He tells me he hopes I'm alright and if I could just let him know I'm alright, he'll leave me alone.

'I'm fine,' I say. 'I had a panic attack. It's over now, but I had to run. I'm sorry.'

Pause. 'Can I get you anything? What can I do?'

'Nothing. I just need to sleep.'

He says something else but I don't hear and he doesn't try to repeat it.

'I love you, too, Benny.'

I half wish he'd act out of character for once and just kick in the door. Kick in the door and get me out of here so I don't have to sit in this awful pool of humiliation and self pity.

In the dark I stare at the ceiling, waiting all of 30 seconds for sleep. I turn the lights back on and unlock the door. The blister pack of five sample pills from Holly are in my bag. I take one dry and lie down again.

There are things I don't want to remember. It's childish, but I told Sami it's like I have to do something at the top of a high ladder. I know I'm dangerously high up, but it's worse to look down and see how high. With an irritating quickness, she

pointed out that this means limiting both perspective and agency. Ignoring the danger will not make you safer. I could have argued, but didn't because she's so gentle and not wrong in what she's getting at.

Steve does the same thing, but uses his emotional intelligence differently. On paper, you'd think having a stammer would be grounds for patience and compassion when another person is struggling to express something. Instead, Steve learned to always cut to the core of the thing.

Three days after Dolly died, the movers brought her furniture to Ava's house. Steve offered to pay to keep it in storage for a year, but Ava wanted to sort through it and couldn't bear the thought of locking Dolly's things away in an anonymous container somewhere. So he came over and helped with the logistics of her belongings instead.

Ava had wandered through the house like a ghost, drained and puffy-faced and startled to realize we could see her, wanted to communicate, to know what she wanted. The movers were forced to pile everything into the front room because the question of where, physically, it all should go overwhelmed her but she wouldn't let any of us sort it out. She started and stopped talking. Eventually, she settled into a chair and watched, impassive, as Dolly's bureau, nightstand, card table, reading chair, wardrobe, were crammed into the room, blocking the view of the street from the windows. She let Jared and me open the boxes the staff at Dolly's facility had packed to begin sorting and labeling their haphazard contents.

When the movers left, a light inside her that had gone dim went out. She walked over to the bureau and tried to open the top drawer, but it was stuck shut. When Steve tried to guide her away, suggesting she take a bath, get some rest, she didn't say anything, but continued pulling at the drawer which seemed to be painted closed. He looked to me for help.

I went into the kitchen and came back with a dinner knife, and she let me pry it open. It was stuffed with papers and documents, old cards, letters, costume jewelry. Ava reached her hands in, and scooped up a random assortment of papers. She took them down the hall to her bedroom, an earring and a coin falling from their hiding places among the papers as she went, and closed the door.

Flicker of horror on Steve's face. He saw what I saw, and then he saw me catch him. 'She'll be ok, H. She's allowed to be upset.'

'Who are you trying to convince?'

There was more to say, things I'd never said because I don't want to hurt him back. But that was a better feeling, a higher thought. To hell with it.

I'd forgotten Jared was in the room.

'You're scaring me.' Jared, who knows but doesn't remember because he had been so little. He was kneeling in front of a box of clothes, holding up a blue shirt of Dolly's he'd been about to re-fold. It was bright against his usual black t-shirt and jeans. He looked like such a child. But he was. He is.

So Steve said Jesus and threw up his hands like he was the only sane person in this house that he had stopped living in 15 years ago, and I told Jared I was sorry.

The next morning, Ava was back to normal, or so we thought, and eager to go to Pittsburgh to track down the video of the study she learned she was in as a baby.

The bed dips down where Nikki sits on it. So I must have fallen back asleep.

I don't need to open my eyes to know it's Nikki; she's the only one who does this. Besides, if I keep my eyes closed, I can continue looking at these trees from another time and another world, at the glowing veins on the underside of the leaves backlit by the sun. The leaves are like open hands.

'Are you ok?' her hand is on my hand.

'Yeah, I'm just tired.' My voice is too loud. I can't feel any tension anywhere. The band that constricted my chest is gone like it was never there.

'You can tell me to fuck off, but I'm worried.'

'No, no. I'll get up. I feel a lot better'

'You put on the calendar you have work today.'

The brightness isn't my lamp but the sun. 'I slept the whole *night*?' Then something kind of like hope. I slept the whole night.

'You're supposed to leave in an hour. So I'll leave you to get ready. Ben made eggs; I'm leaving them here.'

As if by magic, as soon as she says the words, I can smell breakfast, and I am hungry.

My mother's ghost-grief flashes before my eyes for a moment, and the aftermath, the first time I found her slumped on the floor—and even when I try to focus on the darkness beneath my eyelids, part of it is still there, like a lightning afterimage. But it doesn't feel as sharp. 'Do I seem insane?'

Nikki's laugh is husky and relieved. I do not allow the wave of guilt banging on the smoky door to fully hit me as I think of her looking around for us after the concert. She normally has to breathe steam for half an hour. Protect that voice. 'No, you seem... sad. And that is understandable.'

I follow her eyes to my nightstand, to the bong. 'It's Ben's stuff, it's awful.'

'It's shit! I told him already. Let's stick with my guy, yeah? He got 40 percent oregano in there.'

I grin in spite of myself and it's a sweet shock. She slaps me on the back.

'You're alright, Haideilia. You're ok. And before you even ask, you are *not* like your mom. And I'm not like mine except when I say get your ass up.'

She lets me hug her and tell her how proud I was to see her on that stage, even for a little while. She wrinkles her nose.

'I'm so sorry that happened to you,' she said, but I wave it away. 'That show. It was...' she's lost for words. 'I want to do this forever. Haideilia, forever.'

'Oh, there's no doubt you will.'

'They asked us back,' she says. 'Like, just us. We don't even have enough for a full set, but we said yes.'

'Not surprised you were asked back. Now Ben and I can weasel you into joining more of our unproductive study groups so you can write more songs.'

14.

RAMÓN
AUGUST, 1936

When the school year began again, early, things seemed more normal, except that Ramón had begun to look forward to going to school. He had to work on his handwriting, yes, but he wasn't allowed to play much with Alonso and the other boys again. Marianita hadn't known how to play properly, and cried every time she lost in any kind of game. Papá would play when he could, but the pain in his legs could spoil things and it was never the same as playing with other children, anyway.

Just as he had gotten used to being back in school, it all ended without warning.

Padre Leo burst into the room while Tío Hugo was teaching, throwing the door open so violently that it sent the small wooden door wedge skittering across the floor as the doorknob hit the wall with a sharp crack like a firework. Self consciously, he touched his beard, then the front of his cassock before entering the room.

Ramón looked at his tío. Any boy who did a thing like that would have gotten a hard whack on the head, there was no question. Tío Hugo would have whatever he'd been doing, and administer that punishment. He would have stopped in the middle of a sentence.

As it happened, though, Tío had been writing at the chalkboard. He turned his head in the direction of the noise while the rest of him stayed still, his body facing the chalkboard, about to draw the downward line of the number four. His face had a funny expression. The top half was very angry at the disruption: big eyebrows knitted so sternly his eyes were hardly visible below them (Ramón had been on the receiving end of that look many times), but his mouth was open in shock. That expression did not change as the thin, quick Padre Leo sped over to him, nor as he tilted his head to listen to the hurried, whispered message conveyed directly to his ear, which made the two of them look like girls telling secrets. He set the chalk down without finishing writing the number.

Tío's eyes darted toward the door, and Ramón followed his gaze, thinking to check the floor for a black cross, but there was none.

When Ramón turned back around, the priests had drawn back from each other, and Tío was looking at Padre Leo again who nodded at him slowly. Tío wasn't angry anymore.

The sound of someone running down the hall with awkward, thudding steps echoed into the room. Sister Agnes appeared in the doorway, out of breath. She looked at the priests, and then the boys.

'You are all to go home now,' she said, huffing. 'Do not leave through the rectory.' Ramón and his classmates stared in confusion. 'Stand up!' she shouted, making everyone jump. 'Something has happened at the parish house. Go directly home now. Your parents will explain. Don't stop to play. Don't go anywhere but home. Run!'

'Go, go!' Padre Leo said, taking a few steps closer to the children. He was pale.

As if on cue, they could hear a commotion echoing down the hall. And before Ramón or his fellow stunned classmates had done more than stand, parents began flooding into the room, grabbing their boys and sweeping them from the room without bothering with collecting their books or pencils.

Ramón stood, his legs feeling wobbly. Mamá and Papá weren't there. Mamá had left Marianita with the sisters this morning to watch over her while she waited in line for the supplies.

Sister Agnes was now pushing the children toward the door.

Someone was screaming. It was impossible to tell if it came from inside the school or outside. It was much worse than the screaming Ramón had heard in the night.

Sister Agnes's hand thrust him forward, hurtling him out of the classroom and into the narrow hallway full of movement from parents and boys and the sisters darting this way and that, shouting instructions. 'Leave at the west entrance! Don't go through the rectory!' Panic started to rise in his chest as he noticed some of his classmates had begun to cry. He started to push his way toward the stairs. He could

try the back courtyard that led to the convent. They weren't allowed back there, but it was the only way.

'Ramón!' The booming voice was unmistakable. Several people turned, and the the crowd parted like a sea. El Ruso stood before him. He held Marianita in one arm and looked around at the chaos that had resumed. People were getting backed up into the hall as too many rushed the tiny west stairwell at once. He looked at Ramón and jerked his head backward. Ramón followed him against the crowd of people. El Ruso tried closed doors until he found the one to the back stairwell. It was locked, and he did not hesitate to put out an arm to keep Ramón from getting too close to him as he took a step back, and kicked below the doorknob, hard. Then again. The door flew open, and part of the wood framing came splintering down. Marianita started to cry.

'Come on,' he gestured to Ramón to follow, and several boys whose parents hadn't come followed suit.

The stairway led to the back courtyard. There was a narrow walkway that led past the rectory and into the churchyard. The other option was to try to go through the convent, but El Ruso had already decided. As soon as they were outside, El Ruso began to sprint. Ramón ran, too. They passed the back of the rectory, and burst into the courtyard, where some of the adults were running with their children, the younger boys lifted into their arms as El Ruso had done with Marianita, but others, now out in the open, were walking a little faster than normal and looking around, unsure of themselves.

Not El Ruso. Ramón had never seen a grown up run flat out, and it was funny, in a way that made him want to cry, the way his sister bounced on the large man's shoulders. She began to wail.

His hand now caught in El Ruso's iron grip, Ramón had to concentrate on truly running as fast as he could to avoid being pulled through the air like a kite. As suddenly as the laughter had caught him, a terrible fear did.

El Ruso made his way around anyone who was going too slowly, which seemed to be everyone. He pulled them into a side street next to the school and, glancing there, Ramón saw men leading some of the nuns and a couple priests from the parish

out of the rectory entrance, shoving them roughly, and forcing them into a line as though they, too were children. They had rifles. He didn't have enough time to see if Tío was with them, but Sister Agnes was.

When they arrived home, Ramón's throat was so dry from running so fast and so hard he thought he would throw up. He had a painful stitch in his side that made every breath sting sharply. Mamá was waiting for them at the open door, her eyes open as wide as they could go. Her hands shook as she took Marianita, who was still wailing, from El Ruso's arms. She reached out a hand, her long, white fingers finding Ramón, and pulling him toward her, as though someone would come snatch him at any moment.

She said 'thank you' to El Ruso but her voice sounded like it was barely there, the way your throat can get all hoarse and scratchy after a contest to see who can yell the loudest. El Ruso nodded to her, turned on his heel, and bolted across the street. Ramón could see him enter his shop, not bothering to close the door behind him, before Mamá had pulled him inside and slammed their own door closed with a whack. She set Marianita down and it took her three tries to get her shaking hands to slide the bolt through the lock.

15.

HAIDEILIA
DECEMBER, 2022

Steve picks up after one ring. ‘H I’m so sorry to do this but I’m about to head into a meeting. I have about two minutes. I can—’

‘Just returning your call.’ Two minutes is all it should take.

‘Ah. Y-yes. Sorry. Ava has been...’ he takes an enormous breath, ‘Calling and texting and calling again, asking me to check up on you. She says she’s worried maybe you don’t have the funds to fly back over winter break. I thought you were doing ‘Friendsmas’ or whatever it is with Nikki and Ben, but if it’s the case that you’re just doing this to save money, obviously, I would help you pay for your ticket.’

‘Thanks, but that isn’t the case.’ Where the hell did he get a word like “Friendsmas” from? Sounds like something Jared would say. I punch the button at the crosswalk. It says ‘*Wait*’ in its familiar robot monotone. So I wait.

If we were deconstructing this dialogue in class, Burroughs would say ‘A lot of *there* there.’ First, Steve’s hypocrisy at feeling chagrined to be on the receiving end of Ava’s bullshit when I refuse to participate, something I’ve had to tolerate since he left me to it at age fourteen — no resources, no escape hatch for four long years until university. And no real apology. Then, “*she* says she’s worried,” not “she’s worried,” meaning he already knows why I’m not flying back, and so does she. Which also means what he really wants is for me to call her and deal with her so he doesn’t have to. ‘Obviously’ that would be worth the airfare.

‘I figured,’ he says at last. ‘Look, I get you’re upset with her, you’re probably still upset with me, and I get that, too. I’m sorry, you know. I really am. I should have done more, for you and Jared...’ in his silence as searches out the best words he can find before his meeting, the signal changes at the crosswalk and I move into the street, trying keep a steady pace. ‘I can’t speak for her... but I do think Ava means it when she says she regrets what she did. I think the remorse is real. And for what it’s worth I understand completely this decision to keep away. But cutting her off like this... maybe there’s another way.’

‘Was there for you?’

‘Well, I still *talk* to the woman,’ he says gently. ‘You have to take the time you need to work through this and then set your own boundaries. But don’t make her guess at what they are. Just give it some thought. Meantime, I’ll let her know you’re not coming.’

‘I do talk to her, actually. I text her back. When I’m able.’ *Able* is the right word. ‘But I’d appreciate it if you reiterated to her that I’m still just going to stay here and try to get ahead of next semester.’

He makes it to his meeting on time.

Leaving the building, there is a strong aroma of coffee from a passing group of students at the same moment dead leaves rustle past. The sky above is low and iron gray, threatening snow. Good.

‘Ahoy!’

Any other time I would be thrilled to see him. ‘Hey there.’

‘You heading home?’ His smile is so open.

‘Uh, I have a... doctor’s appointment, actually.’ Familiar wave of guilt for still not telling him about Holly, for keeping that from him.

‘Ah. Well I’m actually headed to a café a couple blocks away. I can walk with you for a bit, if you want.’

‘Yeah, sure.’

There is a ton of bright green paint splattered all over the pavement a few yards in front of us. It wasn’t there yesterday. We look up to the building above, but of course there’s no clue as to how it happened. It’s a campus building, so Leith suggests maybe someone was just a little careless with hauling in set design materials. That’s possible. Given how huge the splatter is, though, it might have been dropped, on purpose, from one of the many windows above in the middle of the night. — I did that once, at our dorm building in freshman year, with a cake, for absolutely no other reason than Nikki and I both didn’t want it. It solidified our friendship.

The building RAs hosted the saddest, most half-assed little birthday parties for people in the fifth floor rec room, and when boredom drove us to wander into the

empty space at 1am, we found most of a store-bought birthday cake had been left sitting out. Dropping it out of the window seemed like the thing to do. The mess it created when it exploded, specuacularly, onto the pavement was unbelievable, sending me into a panic and Nikki into a contagious, hysterical laughter. I grabbed her wrist and made her run up the stairwell with me to retreat into our dorm room.

I don't share the story with Leith, and instead point out it's possible the paint is still wet. Large blotches have branched out, shiny and spiderweb-like, from the twisted neon supernova where the paint can must have initially fallen. I can feel rather than see him smiling, and don't have to ask what he's thinking because for him, for now, all roads will lead to the same place until he can make sense of it. We walk a little more closely than normal, just enough that I can feel the heat from him in the chill air. In fact he seems to be leaning toward me, ever so slightly. And it is nice, for a moment, as we navigate a path through this fragmented galaxy of bright green wings, to be the one Leith leans ever so slightly toward.

The last time I saw him outside of class four days ago, after the fiasco at Nikki's concert. We were talking under the brick entryway to near the closed bursar's office when the light above us went out. For a moment, it felt like a terrible omen.

Mood lighting,' he suggested. The tips of his fingers find mine on the railing near to the door. Every time, somehow, is so new.

My first kiss was only six years ago, in high school. It was so terrible that I lay in bed that night rocking back and forth, crying and talking to myself. It was sloppy, all tongues and awkward pulling away and returns, and I initiated it all. It had been a disaster and it was all my fault. But he hadn't been disgusted at all, the boy I kissed. I had been. I remember how certain I was that there was something wrong with me, so I didn't do it again for another two years, by which point it wasn't so bad, but then again I'd been high. And then sex that same year, freshman year —another disappointing first. Disappointing, but not traumatizing. So maybe Holly is right that I'm not traumatized by intimacy. Just afraid.

So we don't kiss much. But when he bent down a little, when leaned in, I tilted my head toward him automatically, and it felt like we'd done that in public a thousand

times, comfortable, like sleeping in your own bed after a long time away. I pulled back gently and he didn't avert his eyes. A flutter of joy and color rose up in my chest, and something inside there comes unanchored, floats, takes us with it.

I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking he could feel where his arm grazed my breast. Both of us were there, quiet meditation over this small point of connection, unassuming parts of each of us we hadn't before dedicated much conscious thought now the hinge on which everything stopped and pivoted.

And his mouth was on mine again, more intense this time. Hand in my hair, the frame of his glasses presses gently into my cheek. When we parted, he adjusted them, and we automatically started half laughing, half sighing with relief.

'What the hell did we just do?' he asked.

Like something outside of us had been pulling the strings. It would have been better to have said nothing at all. Reality screaming back into the frame, and with it all my frustration. 'Nope. You have to own that you knowingly did something you wanted to do.' I found his eyes. 'That is something I've wanted to tell you for a long time.' It isn't about the trauma of intimacy. It's about this: fear that when I really do go for it with an equal, as Holly puts it, he won't be up to the task.

'It's-it's not that I don't want,' he wagged a finger between himself and me. 'this. It's just that I... don't know what I'm doing. I don't want to hurt anyone. I have these commitments...' And in the space between us, I could sense Rachel, whom I've never met and hope never to meet. I should feel sympathy for her—maybe I will someday—but in that moment it was hard to feel anything but resentment toward her. Why is she here, again, when she's never around? They live together.

But that's wrong, isn't it? Because she doesn't make his decisions for him. He does.

'Here's the deal: you can chalk this up to a lengthening series of weird, impulsive moments and leave it. That's not what I want. What I do know is I would take a long, hard look at any "commitment" that stood in the way of something that made me happy.'

So it was out there. And as soon as it was, somehow, it was less frightening, somehow little surprise that there was nowhere to go from there but back down, away

from that, this would-be perfect moment, back into the night to deal with this horrible deflating feeling. But it felt better then, having gotten it out in the open. At least I'd said it. At least I didn't leave things to linger unnamed, ambiguous.

And then he went home. And I went home. Something final coming to settle.

We part ways at the 8th street station.

'It was fun walking and not talking to you,' Leith says grinning.

'It was fun walking and not talking to you, too.'

He waves and turns to double back across the street we just crossed. And as I head into the subway, I send Nikki a quick text I want to hang out more. Let's get a drink when we're home from work and band practice and then go find Ben. Let's throw a cake out of a window.

On the train I check the calendar in my phone to avoid the stare of a very angry, very creepy-looking man with some kind of skin disease sitting across from me on the 7 train, it's been almost two months since I started seeing Holly for 'research' and then just for real. Insurance sends me an update every time I see Sami, but never her. Not once. Every time I bring it up, she says it's all handled, reassures me Steve isn't going to get a call as I'm an adult (debatable), and to stop worrying about it.

The last time we met, we had coffee with Nikki in a dead but cheap café on our street. She looked at me when he turned away from us to take a call from Rachel. I shrugged.

We could both hear her voice. 'Hey where are you?'

'I'm still at a café with some friends.'

'Seriously?' the tone was flat, aggressive.

'Yeah, seriously,' he said in a voice that makes it sound like he really didn't want to be here. 'We're just wrapping up. I'll see you soon.'

Shocked, Nikki mouthed *are you okay* to me, and I nodded in my best nonchalant way.

The moment Leith hung up, she turned to him and said ‘It sounds like you’ve got somewhere else to be.’

He seemed embarrassed. ‘Yeah, that was Rach, I should probably—’

‘Okay, see ya!’ Nikki shot him an icy smile, and he didn’t know what to say. So he made a couple awkward attempts at a goodbye and then left. ‘He doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing,’ Nikki said. ‘I don’t care what the situation is. If he can’t see what’s right here, I have no sympathy and no time for that. That was bullshit, Haideilia.’

The angry man gets off the train at my stop, and I step to the side and pretend to fumble with my bag so he can pass through the turnstiles first. I wait until he’s on the stairs before I pass through the turnstile then jog up.

It’s chilly today so I retie my scarf like a noose and let my hair fluff out all around my shoulders and start walking. It’s going to be an insane tangled mess by the time I get to work. No sign of the creep, fortunately.

When I get to the gallery, nobody is at the front desk, and there is only the general, lazy bustle of finishing up the preliminary walk through for a new installment that will premier next weekend.

I store my bag in a lockable drawer at the front desk and ascend the black stairs that curve up through the open plan foyer suspended only on four cables. They sway when a lot of people are on them, which makes me nervous, but it’s still my favorite feature of the gallery. Stairs like black piano keys suspended from the ceiling on their cables, the shining black floor beneath, white walls, white marble front desk, and the wraparound glass balcony of the second floor where you can have champagne and lean over the rail, feeling everyone’s presence there with you. Above it all, an ultra modern confusion of asymmetrical crystals and mirrors and lights spills from the ceiling and comes together in a stream, thousands of small beads of mirrored light pouring down like liquid ad infinitum, forever on the verge of blessing the heads of the chosen ones below.

The back offices are far less glamorous, nice, but not showy.

Easy to forget at times that I'm just a Gallery Associate. A catch-all title for all the duties an intern would have, only Jane pushed for a title for the part-time role, and that's what I got. The pay is better than if I were an intern, but not by that much.

Being a glorified administrative assistant to Jane, who co-founded the gallery, means my desk is in Jane's office. She has it turned around so it faces a large window with a view to the street instead of the door, which means people are constantly startling me from behind, but it's hard to complain about the view.

We're not often working at the same time, and when we're not, she has me do things for the social media accounts. It feels a bit soul-sucking in a late-stage capitalism sort of way, but it does let me wander around, taking photos and video with a Nikon and asking what everyone is doing so I can share with our community and screw around blogging about our events. It also means colleagues send emails and requests for me to take pictures and informal statements from gallery visitors, or sometimes the artists themselves. 'Academia pays you like you're an heiress,' Jane said when she hired me. 'Like you don't really have to work. So you either find wild success, or take on adjunct work or find some other way to get paid while staying connected to this world. And, if I'm being perfectly honest, the funders of this world.' More tactical than Burroughs, Jane constantly reminds of the importance of networking all the time as a filmmaker. You need to know people and keep showing up. That's how you get the resources you need to make what you want to make on your own terms.

She looks surprised when I walk into the office. Another woman with very short hair, one of the mixed media artists featured in the film, is sitting opposite her.

'Hai-dee-lia,' Jane says. 'I didn't realize you were in today.'

'Sorry, I'm not. I forgot a lens here that I need and I also wanted return this to you.' I pull the Dutch Renaissance book from my bag.

'I love Peeters, I love her style. I found her face hidden in other paintings she'd done. She helped me see art differently.'

Jane puts a hand over her heart and pushes the book back toward me.

The woman in the chair points at me. ‘You made the TikToks,’ she says, and it takes a second to remember some of the recent, weirdly successful posts about her art and a trailer about the film that I recut. Blanking on her name.

Her art mainly consists of shadow boxes featuring nature scenes in varying states of decay, like partially burned bird nests, and cross-sections of bee hives filled with little spider eggs. The stuff of nightmares, really, but also something that forbids you from turning away before it is ready.

I go out on a limb and told her I was fascinated by her work because I found it repugnant. There was something about the safety of a piece of glass between me and an intestinal ant farm that compelled me to really stand there and be disgusted and riveted.

She didn’t seem surprised or offended by this.

‘I’m most interested in what I feel the need to investigate, and artistically, emotionally, I’ve never felt any great need to question or investigate the things that make me happy. I never felt compelled to get to the bottom of things that give me joy. Revulsion gives me something to wrestle with.’

For a long while, this idea informed my sense of ‘serious’ art. I thought it meant that serious art couldn’t include things like humor or joy or happiness because other people had told me they weren’t worth exploring. But there is a kind of weird glee in her art.

‘My kid loves it anyway, so there you go,’ she says.

‘Same,’ Jane taps a photo frame of her son. He has her hair minus the streaks of gray and dimples that remind me of Holly’s and another in the center of his chin that accentuates his chubby smile. He is totally unlike his mother in appearance except for the hair. He is always either holding something or hugging his own arms in every picture.

I grab my lens from the desk and wave at her. ‘Thanks for the book.’

I

‘Hey, you,’ Jane noisy heeled boots come clicking into the hallway after me. ‘We’re actually doing a bit of an after party for this one, but it’s in Gramercy Park. It’ll be on the swankier side. Don’t ask me why: long, stupid story. Post show, you are totally welcome to go if you want, and you can bring a plus one. No prep, no need to work, just a fun place to rub elbows in someone’s ridiculous apartment.’

‘A plus one?’

Jane smiles. ‘Anyone you’d like to impress the hell out of?’

‘Can I make it a plus two?’

Ben is already outside the apartment building in Gramercy when Nikki and I get there. ‘I wasn’t sure if there was some sort of secret password or guest list,’ he confesses, jerking his head toward the doorman who has a friendly face but is built like a pro wrestler.

‘Hope not, I think we just go in,’ I nod to the doorman who nods back and doesn’t stop us. I guess we’re dressed right.

Inside everything is cream-colored marble and a rather outdated looking elevator. I get the honor of hitting the PH button. Of course nothing happens. I press it again. The doors stay open.

‘Let me get that,’ the doorman comes back in and reaches an arm into the elevator. He turns an old-fashioned key in a lock below the button and hits it again, removing the key. ‘Have a good time.’

‘Thanks!’ we call as the doors slide closed.

‘I’m scared,’ Nikki says, but the right word is giddy.

The elevator doors open *inside* someone’s apartment.

Ben gasps. ‘This is so baller but also such a security concern; that dude just let us walk right in.’

By the light of dimmed chandeliers and sconces, beautifully dressed people, some of them recognizable from the art opening at the gallery, mill about. There are bookcases lining all of the walls and, absent those, there are paintings of varying

styles and subjects: some abstract, some still lifes, a couple kissing in the rain. It's a lively mix of old and new.

'Whose place is this again?' Ben asks behind me.

'I have no idea. An art buyer, I think.'

'Wow. This is like a dream apartment.'

A server appears from the crowd and tells us where we can leave our coats or, alternatively, we can keep them on and venture outside. 'The heat lamps are on, but it's still a bit chilly out there,' he says apologetically. 'You'll find a bar through there, and another on the terrace.' He gestures as he speaks, first pointing in one direction toward what looks like a library, and then dead ahead, where three steps lead to french doors that lead out onto an outdoor terrace with a bar and plenty of people milling around in coats, taking in the view.

The server has vanished. 'Oh, let's go outside first,' I tell them, and we move up the stairs and through the french doors.

'This is ridiculous,' Nikki breathes.

The terrace is large and tiered, with a lit bar to the left and two bar tenders in wool coats. There are benches and couches to sit, and the area is flanked by heat lamps, including one overhead that radiates so much heat, I can feel it on my scalp. We step forward and the heat immediately vanishes.

'I'll grab drinks,' Ben says. 'It looks like they just have wine and beer out here.' He leaves without needing to ask what Nikki or I would prefer.

As he goes to get the drinks, Nikki and I walk toward the edge of the terrace. Simple, short columns hold up the stone railing. A large, bare tree is directly in front of me. I wonder if it flowers in the spring. And below is the entirely darkened Gramercy Park. It's not terribly remarkable at night, but the view of the surrounding buildings is atmospheric and wonderful, especially because this building isn't particularly tall. It's also very quiet around here, though music is piped through speakers somewhere behind me.

Ben returns with three glasses of red wine. 'Cheers,' he says, and the glasses clink with satisfying force. I take a sip—it's fruity and sweet, and without the usual gasoline aftertaste you usually get from events like this. I set it down on the thick

stone railing. The idea of it falling off makes my stomach drop, so I'm careful to make sure it's closer to me than thin air.

The stone is rough and cold under my hands, and it's a satisfying feeling. Solid. Burroughs's argument comes back to me. No one would bother repairing the hearts if there wasn't something worth doing out there.

'I'm glad you came,' I say.

'I'm glad you asked us, are you kidding? Do you get to do stuff like this often?' Ben asks.

Nikki narrows her eyes. 'You been holding out on us?'

'Nope, this is a first. The gig is not remotely this glamorous.'

Nikki takes a huge swig and sets her glass down on the railing beside mine.

'I wanted to thank you for letting me wax on about my own stuff all the time,' I say to them, guilt scratching at the door. I'm not totally ready to tell him about Holly yet. And really, is there anything to tell? I haven't much about Leith's research, I've said so much and so little. I take a breath. 'You know, I have enough material about Leith working on his memorial project that... if he were game to get in front of a camera and talk about it, we could totally make a short film about his dad and that work.'

'Really.'

'Yeah. I've been thinking about it a lot, actually. I wrote the opening shot. But the thing is...' I take another gulp of wine, and it's sweet and the acidity comes through now, at the same time. 'I'm here, too, you know? I've *been* here. And I have a whole thing going on. And I could make that film with him, but I have no idea where I would fit in, other than behind the camera. And I'm... there's a different story I felt inspired to write.'

'Main character energy, yes,' Ben says.

'To a better story,' Nikki suggests, and we cheers it.

Below us, a streetlight that had apparently been out turns on and I feel powerful. I'm going to come clean to Holly, and then tell Leith — not that it feels like any great discovery has been made.

Although there's no script and no temple, I'll show Burroughs what I wrote.
Doesn't *have* to start out as a script, right? A story can do. What I see, and the tiniest
glint of my own reflection, if you're looking hard enough.

RAMÓN
AUGUST, 1936

They had stopped going anywhere, it seemed, but so had everyone else. Ramón was only allowed to play where he would be visible from the apartment windows above the street unless El Ruso was with him, in which case he was not to leave the bakery.

The most interesting thing that had happened since school stopped was of course the trouble with the church. It hadn't just been Tío and Sister Agnés and Sister Felicity and Padre Leo. It was all of them. They had let the portress go free on the spot as she wasn't clergy, but that was it. In other parishes the same thing happened. No one had heard from them since because the loyalists had taken them prisoner, Mamá said.

When Ramón told El Ruso this in the bakery, the man snorted. 'Your mamá was here last night, writing the word "gullible" all over the ceiling.'

Ramón looked up. There was no writing on the ceiling.

'The church supports Franco,' El Ruso said as though that explained everything. He was focused on mixing the dough for the millet bread. He pushed it in an x-pattern, first this way, and then that, left hand, right hand. He had rolled his sleeves up, and Ramón watched the muscles around his large elbows move as he worked the dough, but quickly leaned away, wrinkling his nose. There was something sour-smelling about this kind of bread that Ramón hated, along with its grainy texture. Papá had put it best: 'They're expecting him to make bread out of piss and sand.' But the millet was all that there was until the next time Monteguillo, who had turned out to be a very good finder, could manage to procure things like sugar and yeast.

'That's why they were taken prisoner,' Ramón said.

El Ruso shook his head. 'They're not taking prisoners.'

‘Then where have all the priests and nuns gone?’ Ramón asked, to prove his point. Mamá had been to the church and said it had been desecrated, which Ramón imagined meant it had been painted black and abandoned.

El Ruso stopped his work to look Ramón in the eye, causing the boy to flinch. ‘They’re not taking prisoners,’ he said again, slowly.

‘*Then where are they?*’ Ramón returned, also speaking slowly, drawing out every word the way you would to someone who can’t understand you. ‘The church is empty.’

El Ruso sighed, and returned to his work. Ramón felt a rush of pride at having won an argument with an adult.

Ramón visited El Ruso as much as possible, given it was one of few things he was allowed to do anymore. The bakery hadn’t changed much, except that there were no longer any customers, but it was active. People came inside and didn’t pay but left with food or sometimes gave El Ruso supplies or money and left with nothing. Sometimes they didn’t bring or take anything at all and instead had the fastest conversation in the world, whispering too quietly for Ramón to hear before leaving at just under a run. Sometimes, this person was Monteguillo, who somehow never failed to have a couple of homemade boiled sweets in his pocket for Ramón, and would rumple the boy’s hair until he laughed.

The strangeness at home was harder. Mamá, unable to go to church in the mornings, and worried about the priests and the nuns and sometimes would cry for no reason. It made Ramón feel as though he had been thrown into a cold river. On nights when it was bad, she told Ramón and Marianita to say the rosary before bedtime on behalf of the souls of the clergy. Ramón did try, sometimes, but had never in his life successfully made it through the entire rosary. The prayers took forever, and he would often lose the wooden bead he was meant to hold, or drop the rosary. He would wake up with it underneath him, or tucked under his pillow, having left interesting dimpled patterns on his arm where he slept on it. Mamá would smack him if she ever caught him at it, but he also enjoyed crumpling up the rosary so he could smell the pretty cedar scent of the beads between his hands.

Papá was tired and boring more often than not, especially during the day. Sometimes at night he would have more energy, but Ramón knew, he hadn't left the apartment in many days. Mamá ran errands now, or El Ruso. Ramón was generally not allowed to help.

Then one day, something interesting happened, and since he never saw Alonso anymore, Ramón raced over to El Ruso to tell him what happened.

'Mamá came home today and said no one from the parish can have a wake at the funeral home until a priest blesses it because it's cursed,' Ramón said. 'A curse was put on it right in front of her. On a Sunday,' he said darkly, mimicking how Mamá told the story.

El Ruso looked up from the note Papá told Ramón to hand him. There was no one in the shop, so they were allowed to talk. This was El Ruso's rule. 'What was she doing at the funeral home?' El Ruso asked sharply. 'She went alone?'

Ramón shrugged, eager to tell El Ruso the far more interesting story of what happened while she was there.

'A gitano threw a stone through the window, and it landed on the table *and caught fire* as soon as it hit the floor. Mamá said only someone consorting with the devil could do that. The caretaker put out the fire with a wet cloth but now no one will touch the stone or the cloth. It's probably still sitting on the floor, because Mamá says it's not safe to touch until the priest comes to bless it. But there *is no priest* to bless it, so the caretaker is stuck.'

El Ruso stared. 'What kind of nonsense is this? She's saying a Roma—'

'Yes! He came to the door and talked to the caretaker while Mamá was there.'

'What did they talk about? Did she hear?'

'He came to the door and said his sister died. But then they argued because there was no funeral because she wasn't a Catholic, and he was just coming for help with something else,' he hurried through this because this was the part of Mamá's story that hadn't made sense. 'The caretaker said not the church's land but he could help arrange something else if the man came back, which was very nice because he's part of the parish and so that is hallowed ground, and the man should have known better. But Mamá said instead the man was very cross and as soon as the caretaker

closed the front door, *PUM, PLAF!* The window broke and in flew the stone, and the man ran away in the commotion.' Ramón imagined a fist-sized stone in the strange entryway of the parlor. He had been there once, when he was very small. It was creaky and smelt of powder and the sickly sweetness of dying flowers, and the man who ran it had been tall and frightening.

El Ruso seemed to understand. 'So they won't bury the girl, is that it? What happened to her? Why didn't he go to the civil cemetery?'

Ramón was surprised that El Ruso wasn't more impressed with the cursed stone.

'I don't know. Mama said it's a sin if you are not a Catholic.'

'Well, do you know what I think?' El Ruso leaned forward toward Ramón with an ugly look. 'I think that anyone who would deny an innocent girl a final resting place deserves to go to hell. If it's money he's after, I will pay for it.' He wrung out the wet cloth he used to wipe down the counters into a bucket on the floor.

Ramón felt the need to defend his mother but knew that El Ruso was right. He hadn't thought much about the man having to bury his sister. He remembered Marianita sitting crosslegged under the kitchen table and singing softly to herself. He could feel how precious she was, but it wasn't something he could put to words and decided to bring up the curse again. 'What about the stone, though?'

'Are you sure it wasn't already on fire?'

'I'm certain. Mamá watched it catch fire. Besides, how do you light a stone?'

'Cloth. Kerosene. Wrap it, light a match.' El Ruso shrugged. 'Would burn for a little while, at least. The anarchists did that, did you know that? This was how the stationer's shop burned down. You probably don't remember.'

'But do you think he had that with him? A stone and kerosene and a match?'

El Ruso did his upside down smile, which meant Ramón had a point. 'Perhaps not. But I don't believe in magic.' Ramón followed his glance toward the front door where he swore he could see the blue flowers spring back upright from where they leaned around the doorframe to better observe their conversation. 'What I'm telling you is the Roma man isn't the only one with a reason to throw a rock through a window. Whatever happened, it wasn't magic.'

Ramón was angry his fun was being spoiled, but did not see the point in arguing about that. Instead, he chose to glare at El Ruso for a moment. The man wasn't looking at him, but Ramón fancied he could feel it.

Then there was a long silence—you couldn't be friends with someone like El Ruso without also putting up with his silences—and Ramón's mind drifted to the fight Mamá and Papá had when she returned home after the incident. 'Mamá said Maria and I shouldn't be in Spain for too much longer, but Papá won't hear of it. She talked to the caretaker about it. He said it doesn't look good for the Reds,'—El Ruso snorted at the term— 'but it will get worse before it gets better and Mamá shouldn't wait until it's too late.' The idea was so unreal that Ramón found it exciting and strange to think on.

El Ruso did not look Ramón in the eye, but he did not pretend to go back to work, either. 'Well. Your mamá would be fine, of course,' he waved a hand. 'And your papá is no fool.' He shook his head again, and looked at Ramón. 'When I came here, I thought finally I escaped them. But now I see there are fucking idiots everywhere.'

The day that Ramón realized Papá would not get better, not ever, was the day Tomás brought Father Leo to stay with them.

First there came the cot. Someone dropped it off and Mamá set it up in the small sitting room. Then she went back down the stairs to the ground floor to speak with someone, while Ramón and Papá stared at the cot. It was tan canvas and its legs were metal.

Ramón watched Papá breathe as he stared at the cot. He was breathing in the way he always did when he was revving his engine for a good rant. Muscles in his jaw twitched. Then, slowly, he looked at Ramón.

It wasn't an angry look, it wasn't sad. It was a look like El Ruso often wore. And Ramón could not understand it.

But he was quickly distracted when Mamá led Padre Leo by the shoulders into the room.

The Padre's appearance was shocking. He had a beard and long hair, but where Ramón once would have thought of those features as Christlike, now he saw

something different. His thin face appeared almost burned at his mouth and across his hollow cheeks, the skin raw and painful to look at. There were ugly green bruises around his left eye, which was completely bloodshot. He was very dirty, from his hair to his clothes. The one exception was his shoes. His shoes were clean. Ramón guessed they were new.

Mamá said quietly, as though they were in church. 'Padre, you remember my husband, Paolo, and our son, Ramón. Our daughter, Marianita, is in her room.'

Padre Leo nodded in Papá and Ramón's direction. 'Thank you,' he said in a strangled voice. 'Thank you.' It hurt him to speak.

Papá had to look away from the man but nodded. Then Mamá led Padre Leo to the basin to help him clean up a little.

Tomás arrived at the top of the stairs with a large, misshapen canvas bag full of clothes and other odds and ends. 'This is his,' he said, nodding toward Padre Leo. 'I leave it here.'

'Okay,' Papá said.

'I am looking for a safe place for him soon. But no one knows my friend and I did this. You cannot tell anyone.' He said, shaking his head and pointing to himself, and then toward the stairs where, Ramón supposed, his friend waited, and then Padre Leo.

'We will not tell,' Papá said.

'Thank you,' Tomás said, and turned to go before stopping himself. He turned back to face Ramón and pulled a small wooden top from his shirt pocket. 'This is mine when I was a child,' he said, then beckoned Ramón to crouch with him on the floor. With a snap of his fingers he sent it into an even spin. 'Fun, no?' he asked. 'It's for you.'

'Thank you,' Ramón said.

And Tomás left.

Papá watched the top wobble and fall to its side with the same face he made when he was reading. 'They're going to get us all killed.'

Padre Leo was a very quiet guest. He turned down Mamá's repeated offers to take Ramón's room so he would have more privacy, and then, when she felt perhaps he thought that was too generous an offer, Marianita's small room. He said no to both.

'These children don't need to have their lives more interrupted than they already have been,' he said. 'Besides, I'll be listening all night for the door. Sleeping in a cot here, if it's not too much trouble...at least I know first if the door opens, or something.'

Papá hardly spoke and threw dark looks at Padre Leo every chance he could. Instead of reading in the sitting room, he would take books back to his and Mamá's bedroom, or stare out of the window.

Mamá would come home with things to be blessed, which Padre Leo would do. They were things belonging to other people. It was the best she could do for now. Papá wouldn't hear of bringing others into the apartment. 'What is this, Saint Leo's cathedral? If he takes so much stock in this faith, why doesn't he get out there? You think you're going to sneak people in here, under this roof, where our children sleep?'

Then one day Tomás came to talk with Mamá and Papá and brought another antifascista with him who spoke much better English. They talked for a very long time. Mamá, Ramón could hear was crying. But when he heard a low moan, a deep *haa-haa-haa* that he had never heard before, he knew Papá, too, wept.

So, terrified, he went to El Ruso's.

All of the flowers in the barrel had their petals over their faces. El Ruso, it seemed, had been waiting for Ramón, for as soon as he had run through the open door of the bakery, the large man closed and locked the door and hugged the boy.

'There, there,' he said. 'It's all going to be ok. This is for the best.'

'What is? What's happening?'

El Ruso held Ramón out at arm's length. 'Didn't your parents explain to you?' He frowned. 'Is Tomás still there?'

'He's still there, and everyone is crying. And now Padre Leo lives with us and he's afraid all the time. He doesn't do anything. He just blesses things.'

El Ruso said something in a strange language and spat. ‘They took in a *priest*?’
He ran a hand over his hair. ‘And Tomás knows this?’

‘Yes, he’s the one who brought him to us.’

El Ruso shook his head. ‘Your papá’s head must have exploded.’

‘He doesn’t want him there.’

‘No kidding. This is all your mamá’s doing, and that idiot kid. He’s soft. He wants to help everyone. But when you try to help everyone, you wind up helping no one, or worse—hurting someone. You have to pick a side.’ Seeming to remember who he was talking to, he added, ‘your parents are good people. Everyone likes them. They’ll be fine.’

‘I don’t understand.’

Just then there came a frantic knocking at the door. El Ruso picked Ramón up and put him on the other side of the counter. ‘Get in the back,’ he said. ‘Don’t make a sound, do you understand?’

Pound, pound, pound. Then came Mamá’s frantic voice. ‘Ramón! Is Ramón in there?’

‘Ah, never mind,’ El Ruso said, sounding relieved. He walked over to the door, but before he unlocked it, turned back to Ramón. ‘When you say goodbye to them,’ he said. ‘Don’t make it more difficult. Don’t tell them you’re scared.’

‘What?’

But El Ruso had already opened the door and Mamá, whose curly hair was still down, burst in and ran to Ramón. She scooped him up into her arms, hugging him so tightly, it hurt, and asked El Ruso. ‘Will you go with them?’

‘You know I can’t. I have my orders here. But you, you should go. You could try.’

Mamá’s hair tickled Ramón’s face as she shook her head. ‘Paolo.’

And the next day Tomás and his friend came to collect Ramón and Marianita. It was explained to them that they were to be sent to a special sleepaway camp for children, just until things were safe again. But the camp was very far away, in England, where Tomás was from.

Each child had a rucksack with clothes, shoes, and minimal personal effects like toys, photos, and rosaries. Ramón had both of their identification papers, and Mamá showed him a secret pocket she had sewn into the lining of his rucksack where a small roll of cash was hidden. ‘You’ll have to find a way to get it changed into their money,’ she said. ‘Tomás can help you. Only let Tomás see it, no one else. You probably don’t need it. You can write to us when you get there, and we will write back to you. It may take a long time for the letters to go back and forth, but know we will work every day so you can come back home safely.’ She hugged him tightly. ‘It isn’t safe for children here anymore.’

Papá couldn’t leave the bedroom to say goodbye. He was still in bed, and hadn’t bothered with the rope to help himself sit up. When Ramón and Marianita, who had the most extraordinary ability to cry nonstop, came in to say goodbye, Ramón touched his hand. It was yellowish and cool.

‘I love you Papá,’ Ramón said. He couldn’t hide his tears but followed El Ruso’s advice. He didn’t ask for help. He didn’t beg him to be allowed to stay. Instead he said ‘I wish I could hear one more story.’

Mamá swept in and lifted Marianita so Papá could kiss her goodbye and then left with her.

‘There’s no time for that now,’ Papá said. ‘I’ll tell you more the next time I see you. Which will be very soon. You’ll take a long drive with Tomás up north. Then tomorrow you’ll take the ship over, it only takes one day. You’ll disembark, look around and blink a few times, and then get right back on the ship. You’ll see. It will feel that fast, when you look back. And then you can tell us if they’re all as weird as Tomás or if it’s just him.’

It was strange to smile when you didn’t want to. ‘Okay.’ He turned to leave.

‘Ramón, Papá loves you.’

17.

HAIDEILIA
DECEMBER, 2022

I walk in through the door to Holly's as usual, but her office doors are closed. Muffled voices are detectable behind them. So I walk to the waiting room with my book, but there's someone already in there. A man in his thirties with short dark hair and extremely pale skin nods hello. He makes eye contact and has a cocky grin.

I make the awkward knee-jerk decision to step into the bathroom after wincing at him. I switch on the light and the fan and sit down on the edge of the clawfoot tub that is randomly here because this 'office' building is, in fact, an old brownstone. Why am I like this?

The waiting room is for multiple people to wait in. There is nothing visibly wrong with the man but, hypocritically, I don't want to be alone with him in a silent waiting room. I can't tell what's wrong with him, and he must have something wrong with him if he's here, and that makes me nervous.

I pull out my phone. As usual, no messages or missed calls to distract me. The time is 12:24. Six minutes until I can go in. I can't stay in here for six minutes. That'd be weird.

Standing, I turn the sink on, count to ten, then turn it off. I leave and walk back down the hall toward the front door without a backward glance at the man. It'll be better to sit on the front steps outside, and walk in right at appointment time.

'Dandelin Mata,' the man calls to me as I pass, and against my will, my legs stop walking forward. He's pointing at my messenger bag, onto which I have poorly sewn a patch for Nikki's band. 'Rings a bell. Is that a band?' His accent is difficult to place.

It seems unlikely this man would have heard of Nikki's band. I nod. 'Local band, yeah.'

'Not a metal band, by any chance?' he asks.

'Afraid so,' I manage to smile at him.

'Lovely,' he says, and settles back in his chair, smiling. He holds out a hand.

'Sorry for interrupting you. I was just curious.'

‘No worries,’ I say in a much higher pitch than I intended. It’s a relief he didn’t ask if it was my band, or when the next show is. He was just making conversation, that’s all. He doesn’t look like a metalhead, but then again you never know.

He already has his phone out as I walk away, already moved on to other things. Most importantly, he is not intent on watching me leave, or creepily smiling at me as I walk away as I’d feared he would. Maybe there’s nothing wrong with him. Maybe he’s waiting for someone who’s in treatment.

I’d still rather be alone.

The front door closes behind me with an efficient click, and the street outside is relatively quiet for the moment. I pull out my book, *Bright, Green Wings: The Life of Steven Redding*, and open it to the page where I left off, but I’m not in the mood for poetry really, or Steven. I’m not open enough to it. I’m just here to fully come clean to Holly, who will hopefully still keep me as a client.

Better to people watch while pretending to read. Or figure out the way to tell my own story.

The stone steps are too cold to sit on, so I stay standing.

Behind me, the front door opens and closes.

‘So Dandelin Mata,’ the man says, gesturing to me. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Um, “feminist.” It means feminist in Hausa. My friend’s mom’s from is...she can speak a little,’ I finish, flustered. I’m about to ask if he followed me out here, but he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette and lighter.

He raises his eyebrows. ‘A *female-fronted* metal band?’

‘There are many.’ I don’t know if that’s true, but feel the need to defend Nikki.

‘Oh, I’m aware.’ He lights the cigarette and takes a drag. ‘It’s just always a joy to hear of a new one. I’ll look them up. Any song in particular you’d say is their best? For an ignorant newbie?’

I pause for a moment, embarrassed. The only name that floats to the murky surface is “The Clergy” but I know given enough time I could name others. I think it’s one of Nikki’s favorites. Or maybe I’m just thinking of my own story now. “The Clergy,” I say. ‘No, wait, “*From the Clergy.*” That’s right. That’s it. ‘It’s a feminist piece.’

A flicker of something crosses the man's face. "From the Clergy"? Are you sure that's not a cover?' When he sees my confusion he explains 'I don't know if you...there's just a ...fairly well-known metal song with that name.' He smiles. 'It's funny, it really is a feminist song, but originally it was about—well, it was shamefully literal. If you ask me. Satanic. But...' he looks off, leaving me here to stare at him, nodding as though hearing it. 'She's right, I think, your friend. It could be a feminist piece, after all.' He smiles at me. 'Dandalin Mata,' he says again. 'I won't forget it.'

The door opens and closes again. 'What are you talking about?' Holly has appeared with an old man who leans to the side a little, like he could blow away.

'This young lady is friends with a band that has a song called "From the Clergy," which is likely a cover I look forward to hearing.'

'Ah, the world gets smaller,' the old man says kindly. Maybe the younger man is his grandson?

The young man says something in reply but a car drives past as he does and I miss it.

The elderly man launches into a story that seems a continuation of whatever he and Holly had been speaking about. Something about a game he used to play as a child in which he had to protect his town from a dragon. I keep getting distracted by his accent which sounds British by way of something else. He and the younger man and are not from the same place. 'And in those instances I would slay it,' he concluded, grinning. He is very sweet looking. There is something about him that seems to be constantly apologizing, which resonates so deeply that I can't help but smile at him.

'It would be fun to write about an accidental, contemporary dragon slayer,' I say. 'Like, nobody knows dragons exist but suddenly one day there's a huge dragon that appears and starts terrorizing the city, but some poor, random guy has no idea it's happening and accidentally hits it with his car on his way to work. You know, the mundane day-to-day and the existential...' I have managed to stop far too late.

The four of us exchange looks. Well, it's not the *weirdest* thing I've ever said.

‘Yeah, and then he’s a hero to some people and others are just writing letters and petitioning to have him fired because he’s killed an endangered species,’ the younger man says.

I point to him. ‘This guy gets it.’

‘Difficult to say, on looks alone, who could have been a dragon slayer,’ Holly says. ‘By the way —’ she touches the elderly man on the shoulder, about to make introductions, but the old man has noticed the book tucked under my arm, cover side out, and points at it. Shit.

‘Steven Redding,’ he says, clearly delighted. He gives my arm a gentle tap, looking at me like he recognizes me from a long time ago. ‘Now that is one of my favorite poets. And I am very privileged to have been his friend. As I’m sure you know Holly...’

Holly, looking awkward, takes a step forward. ‘Haideilia, this is my dear friend, Ray. He caught me completely by surprise. I thought you’d go straight to the house with Elias.’

‘I wanted to see where it all happens,’ Ray says. His grandson shrugs and smiles amiably, along for the ride.

I can feel my lips part.

‘I couldn’t wait to see you,’ Ray says to her with tenderness. Then, leaning conspiratorially toward me, adds, ‘At my age you can’t afford patience.’

I smile through the shock and manage, somehow, to locate the words, but before I can say anything, Ray goes on: ‘I must say, he would be exuberant to know young people are still reading him, particularly someone as young as you. He was around your age when he began to publish.’ His eyes are brown and shining and reflect the world around him.

I start telling Ray about Leith’s father. And the letters. He remembers Dr Kadar.

‘I don’t know what I could possibly say that would contribute to any profound understanding of Redding’s life as a poet, but I gave what I had...’ he starts to say, then considers his next words carefully. ‘I could certainly tell more about the man he was, perhaps. As his friend, that matters to me. That the world could see him as I

have.' He nods as though deciding to go through with something he's been debating for a long time. 'Yes, I could do that.'

'You see,' the young man tells him, 'I told you if you left the house the world would open up for you like a flower.'

Ignoring that, Ray says 'So you're here to interview Holly, I assume.'

'Uh,' I don't want to reveal I'm in therapy; I don't want him to think I'm some crazy stalker (which is exactly what I am, I guess). I try to make eye contact with Holly but her gaze remains fixed on Ramón. Her expression is impassive.

'That's right,' Holly says.

The young man claps his hands. 'What luck! What incredible luck you have! To think the very hour and day of your interview leading you straight to not one but *two* sources.' He shakes his head in amazement and seems truly excited for me.

'Pretty name,' Ray says quietly. There is a kindness and a knowing in his eyes, but not in the shrewd, calculating way that Holly has that can force me to blink or look away. 'It sounds like the name of a flower.'

'Thank you. My-my mother, she said she made it up. But others have that name.'

Holly's grandson gives me his number. Arrangements for a meeting are made and when Ray stops me to ask about what my friend's 'diary' could accommodate, I tell him he will meet anywhere on any date at any time. 'He would meet you at the Great Pyramids at noon. He would meet you on the roof of the Louvre at midnight. Trust me, he will accommodate absolutely any time, any place.' This much, I can do for him.

And the matter is settled. They turn to go down the steps, Ray twists his body to wave and gasps as he catches sight of the potted flowers. 'My God, Holly, you kept them! You kept them!' The flowers are facing Ray. They weren't facing toward the street before. They were looking skyward, I remember.

My knees go a little weak beneath me with a kind of giddy adrenaline. I try to engage the muscles to make sure I don't buckle outright. I lean on the black iron railing for added support.

Holly responded in some way to the comment about the flowers but I didn't pay attention because I was trying to deal with the medical phenomenon of happy adrenaline. What is it, a dopamine rush? A new inspiration? The goodbyes are said and they turn to go, and I can feel Holly's gentle hands take me by the shoulders and calmly guide me across the threshold and into the therapy room.

My nerve endings from my legs are all rewired directly to my shoulders now and although her touch is light, I feel it too much and it makes me want to flinch and shrug her off only I can't because that would be rude to the one person who's always been there for me, the one person who can honestly listen and give advice. Denial of the instinct to flinch makes me feel like screaming.

She guides me to the chair and lets go. I let my legs give out and sit down with the full un-resisted force of gravity.

I am still clutching the book.

'I meant to tell you sooner,' I say. My voice still works. 'The research hadn't really gone anywhere, we thought he was lost, so I just sort of started to—' How do I explain what it is?

She nods.

'But I found these sessions so helpful and I didn't want to jeopardize that. I would have kept going to you, no matter who you were, it's not like I—'

'Haideilia,' she says. 'It's okay. It's really quite alright.' She nods at the book. 'It looks like you were planning to say something about it today.'

'Ra—Ray saw the book. That's how...' Staggering, to think the connections that would have been missed if I hadn't been holding this damn book. Such a simple thing, but requiring so very much to come before it. Not lost at all.

Holly nods in a way that means *it's ok. I know.*

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