

The Frightened

Thesis manuscript submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Lethokuhle Msimang

Student number: 18M8777

Supervised by Stacy Hardy

November 2019

Abstract

My novella tells the coming of age story of a young woman battling the trauma of objectification. It explores the intimate relationship between a woman and a man, the young and the old, and the camaraderie between women. Having spent the greater part of her youth in various parts of the world, my protagonist faces the stark reality of returning home to her native country. This triggers an angst which causes her to leap between lived experiences and memories. An elegy on how difficult it is to love while dragging the long shadow of shame, it uses short prose and prose poetry to reveal the intimacies and intricacies of self hate and clandestine romances, and to unravel the complexities of memory and forgetting. Built from non linear fragments it seeks to refuse cliches regarding love and to question easy assumptions around gender, family and the innocence of youth.

I draw inspiration from Vita Sackville West's *All Passion Spent*, which eloquently portrays the placid and flickering thoughts of an old woman taking leave from the frivolity of youth. I'm similarly inspired by the sincerity and confessional aspects of Virginia Woolf and French poet and photographer Alix Roubaud's journals and Van Gogh's letters, as well as Lydia Yuknavitch, Max Porter and Elena Ferante's autobiographical fiction. I also draw from J'Lyn Chapman's chapbook *A Thing of Shreds and Patches* and finally Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, for their blurring of life and writing, and their exploration of grief and death as a lingering thought, together with the oppressive urge to create. In addition I'm inspired by the poetry of a new generation of South African female writers like Vangile Gatsho.

The Frightened - Table Of Content

1. Chapter One - The Madness	3	
2. Chapter Two - The Men		8
3. Chapter Three - The Madness		11
4. Chapter Four - The Men		14
5. Chapter Five - The Photographer	17	
6. Chapter Six - Web of Lies		23
7. Chapter Seven - The Body		30
8. Chapter Eight - Hayley Jane		36
9. Chapter Nine - The Red Tailed Monkey		45
10. Chapter Ten - The Photographer		54
11. Chapter Eleven - The Tea Drinker		62
12. Chapter Twelve - Tap Roots		68
13. Chapter Thirteen - The Company of Woman		73
14. Chapter Fourteen - Hayley Jane		91
15. Chapter Fifteen - The Photographer		106
16. Chapter Sixteen - India Oeillet		113
17. Chapter Seventeen - Cinder		121
18. Chapter Eighteen - A Woman Alone Creating		126
19. Chapter Nineteen - The Last Letter From Ile Perdue		132

Chapter One -- The Madness

*I don't mean to make a fool of myself
I'm just losing my mind and I
Don't feel like doing it quietly*

There is a story in me so full of stupidity and pain I hesitate to write it. This delay will carry on for years, embedding itself in everything. I dread to say this to the lord, but if it is my talent that has me run towards pain, to feel it with such intensity, then He should take it back. Make me simple, keep me sane. Let me work in those boxes and wash and iron my clothes. Let me feel the world lightly, give me laughter, make me tame.

This void, this not wanting anything at all. When I find no answers inside me, or in my hands that haven't known work for years, in my heart which has

I mourned you. I mourned like a screaming child. I wrapped myself in brown blankets and woke up drenched in sweat when it was not enough to cry; when I had to drink myself into a drunken stupor, until my eyes changed colour, that unfading yellow, as if my home were in a dust bowl and I were too proud to leave. And then I went mad. I let the sleeves of my dress blow off my shoulders as I ran half naked through a breeze. That night it would rain and I would threaten to kill myself if it meant that I could sleep again or that I could un-fuck the men that had ruined me.

The therapists recommended: *Mrs. Dalloway*, where I read that madness was simply a loss of proportion. In my case I felt, as I imagined Virginia Woolf concede, that this was certainly a disproportionate response to sudden pain. But at its core lay something frightening and far more challenging to repair. I was simply no longer a child, and the ground was not solid, and the Eastern Cape was barren and poor, and I didn't have a driver's license. To witness true poverty when you know what it's like to live easily, is something very hard to come to terms with. I felt in this moment so far away from you, so far below, and most incapable of reaching.

I'm sure you weren't aware that I could grovel. That I could crawl beneath a can of worms and curse myself for being unable to slide below the earth on my belly. You must have thought I was simply slender-- the slim daughter of a rich man. The thought alone is enough to think that I'm conceited. But I think of you instead of all the men who've lay on top of me, instead of being held down on my knees, wrist aching, where there was wetness and there was pain. Instead of the short list of shame that has sampled my amplitude, I think of you who wanted nothing, not by force or labor.

I had to puke the wine out of my belly, to fold my knees into my stomach to learn that there was something impure in the way I felt. There were needles in my arms, a drip to save my liver. And being as I was, you did nothing. To do nothing. To fold one's arms and do nothing. To float in a swimming pool and cup your ears to hear the ocean. To dive into a body of water and rise as if to be reborn. To do nothing is to do a lot. What did you do when I was dying?

Chapter Two -- The Men

*There were The Men and there was The Madness
They always seemed to occur in that order*

Sometimes I think of him walking - away, down, and into the subway. I think of him moving back for fear that I might kiss him. I worry sometimes that I repulse him, that somehow I've hurt him deeply, that there is a reason he recoils at my touch. Though logic forces me to wonder whether he knows that I know that he is behaving this way because his penis is small. I didn't mind that it was small, but when we made love I felt nothing. Something of a strange irony, it felt good to feel nothing for a change. It beat the unending fall of feeling, the nagging fear of being let down. And how I miss him, his skin tone like fading gold, hands fisted on his knees that sort of finished form designed to restore you. He looked a little like my brother, the one my father loves best. They are alike in many ways, my father and him. I must have a reason in order to speak with them.

My father was the first man to break my heart. Men love in order of proximity. The children of his wife would be the ones he loved best, the rest as a kind of discipline. And I've grown to admire men of principle, they are distinct and they make progress. But through grace I've met a man who can pray. I know that may not mean much these days, but it tells me a lot about how he was raised. When I threw my insides out on the bathroom floor, he said that he was praying for me. He wanted me to be well, to relieve my fears of the future. I'm ill-equipped to deal with this world I told him, my mother coddles me like a child. She says this thing inside me is dangerous, she's prepared to help at any cost.

Chapter Three -- The Madness

"If you feel nothing, you cannot write at all; but if, on the other hand, you are so overcome by feelings of ... horror that you cannot control them, then you are no longer able to give them adequate expression"

- Jean Paul Sartre (The Prime of Life - Simone de Beauvoir)

The most honest thing about my rage is its ambiguity. Its bold, non-definitive statements, its lack of originality, its distance from any kind of strife. I don't want him to see me this way, but I write. I write intentionally, expressing this unfocused pain. Defaming myself amongst my peers.

HELP ME, I write in capital letters, HELP ME PLEASE, over and over again. What constitutes the nature of this loss of composure? What holds a vengeful spirit when the body has collapsed?

These days I run. I run in the late afternoons where I am sheltered by suburban trees and the cool of the winter. I no longer worry about what the sweat will do to my hair. It is gone now, and I ascend uphill, where I am breathless and I can taste the blood in my throat. Sometimes I imagine my enemies watching me, carrying on, rising above despite them. I picture my body in perfect form riding the man that I love. "I want to be good," I repeat in descent. "I want to be good, and I want them back." But the moment I return, I feel relief in my mother's garden, and at the end of my run.

My brother doesn't want to move. He finds reasons to remain as he is. Like blades of grass, erect and perennial, he does what little is required to survive. These days he sleeps on the floor, he says he prefers it for his posture. And I worry he is unhappy and it is making him unkind.

Depression is a lonely sickness, it insists upon itself. It has taken a man of height, of stature and locked him in his room. Sometimes I think he's being a child, sometimes I call him selfish, but my brother is an artist and he has painted me so well.

He first thought to have me pose fully clothed before a naked marble statue but in the end he sketched my face with coal and lead and covered my head with snakes instead. He thinks if a woman were to fully evolve she would be frightening, and men would turn to stone at her gaze. And I wonder what it would take for me to become her or to assume myself in my rage.

I AM MEDUSA:

I want the old man to give my body back, I want the doctor to give my body back, I want the mute to give my body back, I want the Russian to give my body back, I want the aviator to give my body back, I want the German to give my body back, and the skinny boy, and the broken toy, and the child bled from my womb.

Chapter Four -- The Men

"Contemporary ruins are slow moving monsters yet ferocious nonetheless. Ruins strewn like fresh waste matter that acts like a wound by reminding us that ... abandonment is a desertion of the senses."

- Nicole Brossard, Yesterday at The Hotel Clarendon

I've spent a great deal of time trying to cushion myself against cold-steel. I thought perhaps if I were just as cold, if my skull were equally hardened, that it would take to my familiarity, recognize our comparable chill. I didn't know what it would require - a cut to the body, a drop of lemon on an open wound. I didn't know what it took to be hardened. Had I known, I might have been patient with you.

Instead I spent months trying to discern what moves you, what I could have done to be closer to you. How to wring a rope around my neck in hopes that you'd attend my funeral, or have you run over by a truck to nurse your wounds. But now I worry more that I've become you, that I'm removed and at times unfeeling. Sometimes I wonder if you've been touched too, and where it might hurt, and how your body turned to steal.

I tell myself it must have been hard to be both white and black. I know it's especially hard in South Africa. I know you want to imagine that we are equal, but we will never see ourselves that way.

What did you mean when you said that I could bring out something in you? Were you worried if I did, you'd end up like me? What constitutes your composure? What gives men pleasure in watching us bleed? Do we remind you of your mothers? Does it bring a man back to his birth?

I've spent a great deal of time trying to maintain my position above other people. Tumbling like a square down a hill when I am in fact a circle, I am round and wheeling. I am the sort of person who should write and read and express myself bountifully and remember my friends who have not forgotten me, who write to me of songs and misfortune and who forever persevere, through love, for light, in endless darkness. They found a pillow in me while I ran trying to shape myself into a square and therefore a lover of squares and men who list their accomplishments on sheets of paper and ignore their mothers calls and respond instead to rocket scientists because on their sheets of paper there are greater lists of accomplishments, none of which involve a stable union, though at times involves the graduation of a child who will grow to loathe his mother because she is white, because she is a dancer, because she must express herself in a manner that his father cannot stand, and because he must mold himself into the image of his father. His father, who served ten years on *Robben Island* only to marry a white woman and bring forth an only child. And how he enjoys his own company and neglects the women in his life. But does he want them? They most certainly want him, because he is perfectly square. Square enough to pick a lock with sharp corners, square enough to get them in where they do not belong. Because being with him, I confess, felt like an invitation to a club I was never invited to.

And you never will be invited, he answers, and that is a good thing. Because there is nothing there. And indeed there is nothing in there except every other man with a list of accomplishments. There is in there: wealth and a budget for beauty, and the opportunity to be invited to games, and the luxury to lose and afford to play another. Though nothing is real in there, life there is easy. And there is a chance there to walk away from anything and to perhaps find it elsewhere again.

Chapter Five -- The Photographer

*In love with the lake
The swan longs to stay longer
But the ice covers the lake
And the swan flies with no regret*

-- Tsangyang Gyat, Sixth Dalai Lama

At first, I thought he was homeless. He didn't smile so much as he grinned. His front tooth had a brown lining around it. He had something of a constellation tattooed on his wrist. Had on a cashmere waistcoat, tap dancing shoes. He looked, most of all, unfortunate. His hair grayed in areas, left a bald patch at the center of his head. I often wonder what caught my interest.

He signed the back of his photograph with a fountain pen - Ladhak, India, the image of a bright blue lake in what looked like Mars, the texture of grain on paper imported from Poland. I thought, perhaps it was that he had a sense of what was beautiful, a conclusion of quality: the kind which took my mind off the road and made his presence there seem an act of humility.

But there was nothing unassuming about this man who exhibited pictures taped to the walls outside a store. A cardboard box on the ground for his coins. He was a beggar in a fancy waistcoat.

I took a moment to examine his photographs - a woman in a shawl on the shores of India; an elephant caught in a gust of wind; a white goat peering out of a large blue door; and a woman dancing on a mattress as the light of a setting sun funnels through her window. "They look like paintings," I tell him. "My wife took that one," he replies.

He asks for my name and I tell him. It rolls well off his tongue as he resounds it. I learn the tattoo on his wrist is the wheel of an ancient calendar, he learns that mine is below my waist and that he cannot see it without lifting my skirt.

"So it is a saying?" he asks.

"Yes" I reply

"In your language?"

"Yes"

"And you got this because it means something to you?" he says pressing his hands against his chest.

I agree when he asks to take my photograph, because when you are young you think a soul that is refined stands out from the floor. That it takes flight from the gravel, like dust upon a sudden footstep.

I buy five of his postcards including the one taken by his wife, and I marvel at his cursive, so unerring, as he signs his details on the back of my card.

A girl comes to terms with being on her own. She develops rituals to sustain her oath. And it becomes evident with time that she has left a good deal of space to speak down to herself or to crown her solitude as a template for art. To say, for instance, that it is her depth and their lack thereof which makes it hard for them to notice when she's gone. Then she pictures her face taped to the walls in the Marais and dials the number signed at the back of her postcard.

He speaks with so much gaiety, the kind, she'd come to believe, was only achieved when one had surrendered to a moment. She dreads to imagine how she'd feel should his voice ever change. She tells herself it is her interiority she must maintain.

She'll wear a knitted brown shirt which once belonged to her mother, carry her brother's striped cardigan in case the wind blows. She feels at ease in loose-fitting clothes. She finds the best costumes retain an element of truth. So she keeps her hair braided in cornrows when she meets the photographer. She'll wait five minutes in front of a big blue door on rue Feydeau.

They mount to a loft, ornate, with a tiny window, it gives way to a feeble light. He asks that she takes off her clothes, he says he feels decomposed. She lets him lay her down on his sofa and covers her breasts with a scarf, then he climbs up his old ladder where he takes her photograph. And it isn't so much that he finds her beautiful, but that in so doing he owns it, so that when he no longer sees it, she will no longer see it herself.

You don't like the photographer, but you will stay with him. And this will be the shape of how you love. Willfully, with all the might of your mind, numb to his touch on your body. There will be a rapture, a severing of cords, a disjuncture between your love and your passion. For instance, you accept with accordance that no man has captured the light as he has, and though you wish he were younger, it is quite alright that he fucks you from behind.

This system of love is in your hardware:

Take a man from his wife, have him love you. Watch it fester like woodlice hollowing the trunk of a tree. *We are The Frightened*, the woman of substance and sin, we know our fathers saw our mothers this way.

I met the photographer's wife on my nineteenth birthday. He introduces me to her as his assistant. She is kind to me at first because I am young. I am polite because she's eight months pregnant. But I am nervous and eager to please her, and she is immediately aware that something's wrong. She places her hand on his leg which he shakes away. She is obedient but controls him in her own way. She shows me the jewelry she's made - a river pearl sewn into the weaving of two strings. It is delicate, unique, she offers it to me in a transparent packet. She tells me, "When I was younger, I was like you, I wanted everyone to like me, but now that I'm older I don't care." I tell her, "I worry that I've made the wrong impression," because she is beautiful and this makes me want what she has.

She has the same constellation tattooed on her arm. She offers me her wrist, pale and porcelain when I make mention of it. "We got them together," she says, and I notice his name tattooed underneath it. I pretend not to notice, except, I know now that she is not his wife.

They live together, they will have a child together, but he refuses to belong to anyone. And she wears his name on her wrist like a ring around her finger, she carries his child as consolidation. We take the bus back to his place where he sits beside me instead of her. He doesn't care when she is visibly upset. I offer to change places with her but she refuses. When we get off the bus she walks ahead in silence and the photographer takes this moment to grab my hand.

I think he is making me into someone I'm not. *I'm not audacious, I'm not unkind.* I let go of his hand and try to catch up to her, but she speeds ahead each time I reach her. I tell the photographer that he should not have sat next to me. He says, "Me, I am simple, I only do what I want."

The photographer's wife slices a baguette and serves it with a selection of jams and liver pastes. She pulls out a ball of wool and begins to knit. She tells me "it's a little jersey for the baby," and I lower my eyes in disgrace. The photographer opens his laptop and shows me scenes from a photographic documentary shot in all the places he admires. He shows us the opening scene of a pilgrim walking into Tibet. I tell him I've already seen this part, and his wife looks up at me with eyes razor-sharp.

I'm uneasy in his house, I'm uneasy in her silence. She seems welded together by sharp objects, but there is longevity in her demeanor and I want to get out.

The photographer walks me out despite his wife's despondency. I tell him "I cannot do this. This is not who I am." He tells me love is not possessive, that I do not understand this because I am young. He grabs my wrist and approaches my lips in rapture. He covets, he consumes. He strokes my breast and grips the round of my flesh from behind. Beast of a man he is, this lover of light, he wants me more than ever now that I won't be coming back.

Chapter Six -- Web of Lies

*"I would not be concerned with the secrets,
The lies, the mysteries, the facts.
I would be concerned with what makes them necessary."*

-- Henry & June, Anais Nin

I've spun a web of lies. The first, I think, was to catch a fly, or someone flying. To cling to his ends as he took flight like all men of might who aren't held down by things which weigh.

I saw him shake the hand of the President. I saw him grow a beard; carve a mustache. I saw him hold a job; a driver's license. I tried to reach for him up there.

My fear, I think, was to be earthbound, to be solemn. To be below when everything was above. That no good cause would bring him back to me, no apology, no sudden beauty. No folded arms or feigned indifference, no better man or finished book. So I lied, I spun a web of lies. I said an old man had tried to rape me: that everyone there had laughed about it. I said he'd held me down on my knees, that he scraped my cheek with his belt buckle. I wanted to remind him that I was desirable: that I was helpless and I needed his help. At the time I would rather have suffered his pity than to endure his indifference.

He had once wished me well as we went our separate ways. I imagined he thought it would be painless, or that perhaps with time, my tiny pain would go away. But I sat on the grass in my old home and prayed. I sat praying an empty prayer when I knew no perfect God would change my face. I was no longer a thing of wonder and grace: that he would never pursue to touch me. I am despicable -- I know, God knows.

What people don't realize about the boy who cried wolf, apart from his lies and childish behavior, was that he was bored. He used to sit on top of hills and tend to sheep, day in and day out, looking down on a village that seemed bustling with activity. Moses, on the other hand, floated in a basket through a river stream, went from slave to prince to rebel and savior before holding a cane and guarding his sheep, before he learned that the Lord was our shepherd and that his work was a Godly act. It takes time to lead a life that is saintly, to know grace and to see it as such.

But the Boy who cried wolf was just that, a boy, and little boys are rightfully restless. He cried Wolf, Wolf and all the farmers emerged with their spears, and he laughed at the excitement deprived of him for years. "Do not tell lies," the farmers said, when the boy cried wolf in earnest, "or no one will believe you when you tell the truth." And there lied the moral of the story. Not much is said of the boy and his boredom, of how an idle mind is the devil's playground until you start staring at pencils, scissors, knives, and sharp tools: you read the backs of antibiotics, contemplate the dosage. Then your mother tells you the Vice President's wife died from an overdose of Malaria tablets. That she was overcome with ease, became limp; that she was frightened by her sudden weightlessness, called for help but no one came.

And I ask myself the following morning, with stomach cramps from twenty-one capsules of flu medication, in all the times I've tried to kill myself, how many times did I want to die? What if a man really did try to rape me? Would it break or legitimize my fate?

When you tell the truth after you've lied, you must face the silence. They are speaking of me and they are laughing, and I haven't heard a word from my love. I think, to be caught in this lie is a blessing, it is an opportunity to feel the ground on my knees, to kiss the floor, to be humble.

But the lies I've told are keeping me up at night, I am losing your hair because of my lies not their laughter, and life goes on and on and my shadow darkens.

But my father has begun to read my work and he likes it. He is pleased by the thought that I might live with him. He will ground me in a world of admin and recognized work and I will no longer feel the fear of the future. My brother thinks that it is cowardice to surrender to convention, when I am a poet, and when I have so distinct a voice. He doesn't understand that to live with my father is to live away from home. He doesn't understand how that pleases me.

When you have lost all your friends. If you have lost them more often than once, there is likely something wrong: something in your way or your temper. It's probably in your accent: half here half someplace else, or in the odd fact that you prefer to be alone. Perhaps it's because you wouldn't leave the poor boy alone, that's why he had to cut you out, like a severed arm, like an empty packet of chips.

When you have lost all your friends, you stop trying to make them; build a wall higher than the one before, keep a box full of pills in case the quiet gets to you, read a book, watch a movie, change your email, turn off your phone.

They are gone because you swore at them - because you never quite learned their code. They're gone because you thought you were better than them, and then suddenly found yourself feeling small. They are gone because you stole all of their men, or because their men can't see that you are spoilt and inconsiderate. They are gone - because you're always sorry; because you're intense; because you write poetry.

When you have lost all your friends you take it out on your brother. You need him, you hate that you need him, you try very hard not to shout. And you think more than usual; come late to every class; scream into your pillow in the morning. Because there is something twisted inside you, something crippled and sore. It has coiled itself around your gut...but you'll never know what, and you'll never know why.

I thought it might have been a symptom of stress. We'd be driving down a road at 60km/h and I'll clench my fists in fear that we are going too fast. I can't say when I lost my sense of proportion. But every car seems to be swerving too close to the curb, every traffic light is reminiscent of some strange portal. And I go back and forth in my mind each time.

I think of a boy in a bed, positioned and turned every hour or so. He slurs his speech as he speaks, and there are clusters of dried saliva gathered at the corners of his mouth. He talks to my brother, he talks to his family and friends, he looks at me with disdain each time I enter. His brother warns us all that he is yet to thread together his filters. He is cognizant but cannot hold the truth or tell a lie.

The boy on the bed shows us pictures of his ex-girlfriend; pictures of his body before the crash. He has learned to move his arm but cannot unlock his fingers from a fist. His brother holds up his phone and pages through each photograph. "That's me," says the boy on the bed in view of himself shirtless and toned. The nurse arrives to reposition him, his might and muscles completely worn. His friend wipes the crusts of saliva browning at the corners of his mouth, but the boy shrugs, insisting on his own capacity. And I am struggling to mask my repugnance, fixing my sight on the gap between his eyes.

My brother and I, stay with our friend until the hospital announces its closing hour. I tell him I leave for Paris the following day, but I'll be back to see him after I graduate. "Why does she do that?" the boy says to my brother. "Why does she do what?" my brother asks. "You won't come back!" says the boy, "you always lie. You were lying the moment you walked in here." I lower my eyes in order not to cry. "People always think that," I reply. "People always seem to think I'm being insincere..." "It's because you always lie!" he says, "and you always get caught!"

He hates me, the boy on the bed, he hates me more now that he knows his mother is dead and he is unable to move his legs. And I've tried for the life of me to discern what informs this abhorrence. "She's coming back," my brother says. "Tell him! You're coming back, right? Tell him." I hold on to my silence in fear that he is right, and in part, because I'm tired of being treated this way. You always lie, I repeat to myself, you always lie and you always get caught.

I once met a priest who, clinging to one end of a broken twig, said that he refused to be two in one. He said this because something in him refused to die. "It was a promise," he told me, he had hoped after months of waiting, to wake to a list of reasons why he had found himself here, alone, and without hope at all, and yet each morning he spoke, more especially on Sunday mornings, to a host of hands pressed in prayer bidding for redemption.

He had felt that quiet rejection of the world - the one which points a finger, holds a mirror, and wondered whether he wasn't, in fact, a small and awful person. "No," I told him frankly, "you can't afford to think this way". It begins with a thought and before you know it all that surrounds you appears vile and cunning. To hate yourself when others love you is what it means to be two in one. "You must trust the present" I scolded. "At present, for us, you are a man of God".

Then suddenly and without reason I found my head on the preacher's shoulder - it balanced on the edge of his collar bone, it dampened his shirt with its tears. I cried because I've tried and tried and fallen to my fears like gravity - finding myself here again, asking the Lord to bring things back to me.

Chapter Seven -- The Body

"Do not listen to what any society tells you about the body – the body is the metaphor for all experience. A woman's body more than any other. Like language, it's beautiful but weaker sister..."

- Lydia Yuknavich, *The Small Backs Of Children*

If you don't understand how I feel, try to imagine yourself in your mother's womb, without contemplation, without exposure, in your first position. Remember what it's like to belong to yourself, to imagine life before you've lived it. Do you recall your father's first embrace: the first stranger to whom you belonged? Do you remember looking up to your brother, throwing away one boot because he'd lost his? Soldiering through the living room in bathrobes, with rubber swords and one shoe. Do you remember the first time you saw your grandmother slaughter a chicken, do you remember being asked to bathe in its blood. Or the first time you heard a song and mimicked its register, and learned for the first time that you could sing. Do you remember the day you met your half-brothers and found that they were the same age as you? Or the first time you learned that love was friction, that to rub your parts against a pillow, a woman or a man would cause the same reaction. I was once so insulated, so protected and warm, yet my first reaction to love was violent. I screamed, "What are you looking at!" to the boy who couldn't help his gaze. He looked at me with so much love it provoked my disdain. Love wants to touch you, love wants to pull a child out from its mother's womb, to pierce your soft parts and demand courage from you. Love accustoms you to the vulgarity of men. It is from the wetness, the endless thrusting, the bloody months and bloated belly, that I found myself curled in my first position. Love made a woman of me too soon and I killed my child, I killed my child, I killed my child.

And then the weeks of blood, bloated belly, soft stool, and swollen breasts: moods swing like coastal winds; sponges drenched in old blood and mucus. We women and our leaking bodies, *So much time taken up on our aches and pains*. I heard James Joyce had a wife who was constantly bleeding. She'd bleed in her skirts and in their sheets; their marriage dampened with the metallic scent of fresh blood. He must have been a liberal, I deduced, these are early signs of a mingled mind.

I hear the first sign of an uptight person is the fear of contamination. I thought, perhaps that upward bookworm who wouldn't drink from the same cup as me, or the stud who replaced a hug with a handshake, perhaps they were all republican. Better a bleeding wife and bloody sheets. Because you have to betray yourself to be uptight as a woman. You have to betray your body. You have to say I don't fuck and I don't bleed: that my nipples don't tingle when he slaps me.

And still, I wonder if I'm afraid of men or if I'm just afraid of getting stuck in the kitchen. I feel misplaced, standing there, scrambling an egg. I feel a sudden urge to change my accent or gesture the pristine of a Californian kale eater. I want to say that I love coconut water, I want to slice an avocado for a snack. I want to wear a watch which dangles off my neck, I want to say that it was once my grandfathers. And in my bag must be a camera, so that I might photograph the food that I prepare. A nice vegetarian dish, Swiss rolls. I'd like to poach an egg instead of scrambling it.

Let me describe to you what I look like now. I'll give you the image of what I'm like so you can understand in full what becomes of the body when it remembers. I want to say that it's the heat of this country, the unrelenting sun. That it is the dryness of its winters that crease the eyes and spots my sunburnt face.

I chew the insides of my lips to even out the ripples of ulcers. I scratch the back of my left ear to soften the bumps of my scabs. My toenails have grown out and left a hole in a number of my socks. The hairs underneath my arms have lengthened and curled, and I've left them that way, unshaven, as proof that a part of me still grows.

What's become of my body is pointless, I don't wear the sort of clothes that would show. And there is no man that would undress me, or break a neck trying to stare. But I'm far better now than I was before. What you are seeing is my marrow, my bone, and there is something to be said of its density. You're seeing what I've felt like, what I've masked beneath soft tones and gestures of understanding.

That I am nearly destroyed, ruined between becoming a woman, and my body remembers. It patterns this pain in the hurry of my pulse. It says now that I cannot drink, that I cannot want. It does so by making itself unwanted. It colors the lips gray, yellows the eyes, and holds my belly ransom. My tongue tastes like rubber and yeast, or like something of our first kiss. And I'm beginning to wonder who between us was more tolerable, whether love weakens the taste of a bitter tongue.

But there are days when the weather agrees with me, where I feel the weight of my rear, its movement, how it sculpts my body from behind: and I'm proud of what I am and where I'm from, and what is left of my body.

From as far back as I can remember, I've always wanted to be in love. To me - love was to speak softly, to have long silky hair. Love never wanted to fuck you from behind. Love carried you, looked you in the eyes. Love was between a man named Ridge and a woman named Taylor. Love was a soundtrack over their laughter, it was a confession, a quiet understanding. It was your begging, my neglecting, and our reconciliation. To my mind I was strong, when you were always on your knees. That's what love was to me, it's the way I've always imagined it. Making love in the shower, reading a book as it rained.

I fought the urge to be considered a thing of beauty. To be seen, to be alluring. Everything was measured in a figure of grace -- be it the volume of laughter, or the audacity of rage.

And then there was the female gaze, a silent meditation on your falling. To be beautiful was to be considered by others and quietly estranged from yourself.

But I demanded the examination offered to those who were bold or distinctly beautiful. And I removed my hat, I softened my exposure, and there before me sat an audience prepared to hear my poetry.

Some said it was the tone of my voice, or a partial outcome of my privilege. Others wondered where it came from, while my mother stood apart and worried. She saw this sudden boon and the wreck which informed its content. She saw a grown man's want and misuse of me, she prayed that I return home safely.

At times, I loathe what I've become, I struggle with this outcome. I tell myself sometimes you become the thing you fear in order to do the thing you love.

Chapter Eight -- Hayley Jane

"You are romantic and cinematic and dreamy.

And yes, it is silly – but it is also beautiful, and brave...and real."

-- India Valladares Lovelace

I met Hayley on the equestrian team, and she took to me like oil paint caught on a pair of jeans. She had the sort of charm that reassembled itself around each corner. She'd speak of her time in the Middle East to lift a resistant smile on a rider from Kazakhstan, she related to the Russian rider her shared understanding of pestilent lovers. And then to the girl with a thousand cuts on her wrist came the stories of artistry, stories of rage and unsalvageable pain. But Hayley looked at me with disdain, and yes I say this again. She looked at me this way because I was silent, and because I added no light to what she said. "Silence has a way of exposing a gushing wound," she said. That's what she was, Hayley Jane, a severed vein, a gushing wound.

Hayley and I agreed to meet over the weekend to buy our equestrian gear. She imagines her legs trimmed and lengthened in high-waist pants. I picture my bottom sculpted and my braids tied up in a bun.

Hayley insists on beige pants with khaki patches plastered to the sides of her knees. I am at odds when she asks my opinion, so I draw her attention instead to a range of whips poised below a tiny window. "Okay, so on a scale of one to ten." I ask. "How much of your decision to ride was based on these outfits?" Hayley laughed out loud and grabbed my arm. She says "I honestly couldn't care less about horses!" We struggle to hold our breaths as a shop attendant puts us in view of her eyes rolling. "The audacity!" I whisper to Hayley, "Does she not see that we have whips?" We weaponize our laughter, making it our mission to distinguish ourselves as experienced riders, *be that if only to rotate her eyes back in place.*

It just so happens at times that your soul finds its reflection in the people you least admire. Hayley for instance, spoke in parables and her life thus far seemed to have culminated in a series of costumes. The first of which, I would learn, was her name. She'd written it on her Curriculum Vitae, and inscribed it in the memory of her peers, so that outside of Los - Angeles; in Paris, Ireland, and possibly Beirut, Hayley Smith had come to be known as Hayley Jane.

Hayley's mother's side of the family was part Native American, and she compared their lineage to Pocahontas forced to wed John Smith. Evidence to which, she thought, could be found in the thickness of her hair. Like her mother, Hayley's hair flowed down to her back, the darkest of browns the texture of mane but soft like the brittle ends of moorland grass. Combing her fingers through her hair, she says, "It is the one thing my mother has given me, I am proud of."

Hayley keeps a record player beside her foldable couch dressed with her grandmother's quilt and a set of bohemian cushions. Everything symbolized something in Hayley's apartment, so that one felt that this was not just her house, but a tapestry of memories weaved from the clutter of her mind.

But something in the way she speaks has me shift back in my chair and consider the hour. I hadn't realized it then, but I was always disturbed when people spoke ill of their parents. I think it was a judgment I'd adopted from home. Black people hardly spoke this way, even if there was a lot to be said of what was wrong.

I hadn't seen or spoken to my father in four years. He never reached out and I never noticed. Last I recall our family was at odds in Time Square. Punches were thrown and siblings were arrested, and the following day we flew our separate ways. My father tells me he is disappointed. That he was impressed by me at first, but he now sees that I'm just a trouble-maker. And I press my hands over my ears on the bathroom floor relating his words with those of the photographer. *I am a devil child and I want God to change me: I'm a silly tactless whore, I am an egoist: something is wrong.*

I consider for a moment to ask Hayley about her family, I consider relating the troubles in my own. But I'm comfortably seated above her in silence, and I will leave her place with a part of her story, and her knowing nothing of mine.

Hayley tells me that she has added a suffix to her new name. She met a bearded Spaniard at a couch surfing party who called her by the name she'd inscribed on her profile: Hayley Josephine Jane. She doesn't ask that I refer to her this way, "for the time being," she says, "you can call me Hayley." And I'm surprised she thinks I'd call her any other way. "I don't know Hayley." I'm troubled to say, "I feel like a name is something people give you, it is imposed on us not the other way around."

Josephine believes we eventually assume our names. That we assume these definitions our parents have imposed on us. She can already tell what her parents had in mind when they named her. She imagines Hayley: sporty, American, and blonde with bleach white teeth, a dog, and a brooding partner. "And for the longest time" she says "I tried to be that girl." she dyed her hair, bought a Husky, lived with a boy named Kevin, and she could see herself drowning a wolf in her sleep. Kevin was sweet, she said, but she was too strong for him, too woman.

The wolf faces the Mirror and I could have sworn I saw it rolling its eyes. Jane pulls out a hard covered book, slightly torn at its edges. She boasts, this book belonged to her grandfather, that her father never let any of her siblings touch it. Casanova, I discover, was a real person. He was a wandering soul like Jane. He was a true lover of women, she explains, for they were not just pursuits of pleasure, but acts of love.

"And how do you suppose the women felt?" I ask, my thoughts returning to the photographer. She believes the women in his life were grateful because Casanova was a giver. *That makes a difference*, I thought, *some loves give, others take*. I didn't know how to phrase it at the time, but it was all in the giving and the taking...

"I think I'm a giver," said Hayley, as I lower my eyes to un-witness to this lie. She's convinced herself of this generosity from all the ways she has distributed her body: She has given the wolf to the Spaniard; cushioned her heart with Kevin, and pressed her foot over the chest of a pimpled snob named Augustine. She believes Hayley belongs to Kevin, and Jane belongs to a dream, and somewhere in between, she believes, the Spaniard gave life to her new name and she will henceforth be referred to as Josephine: a keeper of secrets, a lender of love.

But so much is being taken for granted in this dynamic she has concocted. I tell Josephine about my father. About the day I met his mistress. That I was confused at first, and asked if he'd introduced her to anyone else, any of my siblings that is. But he had not. He was especially worried about my brothers finding out. And I remember feeling proud at first, like my father had trusted me, or that he could sense my capacity for understanding that I could stomach such a thing. I spoke to him about it composed, trying to figure out how his affair might play out logistically. But when I was alone, I felt that he had hidden this from my brothers in respect of their innocence and by telling me he was disregarding mine.

I hoped to convey to Hayley how surreptitiously violation occurs. How in keeping someone's secret you risk becoming someone's secret. I tell her, "We hide the darkest parts of ourselves from the people we admire." But also, we are depleted each time we let a man into our beds.

Chapter Nine - The Red Tailed Monkey

"Muffled rage stalks like the wind. Sudden and Invisible. People don't fear the wind until it fells a tree. Then they say it's too much."

- Sefi Atta, Everything Good Will Come

He wants to know what causes my heart to leap and what scatters my concentration. He wants to know as if to know will change things, and so he asks often and most desperately. Not you! I want to say, not you with your wooden frame and tearing eyes of allergies. Not you whose head is large, and whose tongue tastes like cigarettes. Not you who smells of one whole day and who cannot hold my secrets. Not you, when I have known better and when I've come so close to what I want. The truth is always cruel when it is stripped of all its sympathies. I call him the Red Tailed Monkey because of his clan name, and because at times he looked to me this way; he kept a variety of Buganda hats, patterned and sewed to his preference. He wore one each day, religiously, emblematically, but also to cover the shape of his head. In the spring his eyes mirrored the soil in reaction to the pollen. And I peered past my judgment and feigned love for him, from no less than what I'd learnt of his mind.

He'd send pictures of his artworks, a link to his interview on BBC radio, and speak at length of his academic accomplishments. He spoke this way more often than necessary, like someone who had something to prove. But so considered was he at times that he'd often catch himself and pull me closer as if to say; it is this, after all, that is more important. And I was flattered that should he have something to prove, it was me that he should try to prove it to. Time had given me the ill fortune of having seen the lengths men were prepared to go to display their disregard, and this was a man perfectly enchanted, it was important to me to maintain this regard.

I think of you when I am depleted. Or when it is warm and I am tired and I fall asleep in the car. When for a time the light touches and I must squint my eyes in order to drive. It is the simple times. The moments of dwindling joy, like my last cup of tea, like a lukewarm hot water bottle, the things which beckon one to sleep or to draw someone closer. It is then that I think of you, and your face, and your hands, and the corner of your forehead, of your veins and your dimples.

Sometimes though, in order to sleep, I think of your smell, of the ways that it repulsed me, of your teeth yellow as corn. I think of your eyes leaking, and the shape of your mouth and I am momentarily convinced that I'm far better now that I'm alone.

What hurts though, is the thought that you are crying, to see you broken while I am powerless to lift you. Because I cannot change a thing I've said, it is not enough to tell you, "once, I was beautiful, and the men sent messages in hope, and I turned my head and preserved myself....that I loved you, though nothing I say these days is true, and I'm coming to terms with myself despite you."

Sometimes I wish to show you my old home with its many trees. They have grown tall competing for the light, and I walk through the shady corridors of the courtyard and I think of all the rooms where you could paint. If you were here, you would be helping my mother lift the boxes from the ground floor, helping her rearrange her furniture. I would make tea, and the two of you would discuss the current climate, and she would look at me, quite pleased, that I should be with you.

When I left Paris I thought I'd leave everything - my professors, my friends, my scars, my envy. I thought I'd reestablish myself, elsewhere. Where I had not bent down on my knees when I was asked to, where I had not bled out in a white room and killed another child. The Red Tailed Monkey is convinced that I am traumatized, so I try to detail to him the banality of the whole experience: one pill to stunt the babies' growth, the other to induce a miscarriage. I told him I joined my mother and the army general for tea just a few hours after. I make light of the fact that I wore diapers paired with the irony of being introduced by my mother as her child.

"It had a huge effect on you," he responds oddly determined. "You can laugh about it, but it has affected you. I know it has, it does!" and I realize I must submit to this story of trauma; of a woman distraught from the loss of a merging cell, a woman severed but who remains miraculously composed. It is the only tale a boy is set to understand. I tell him it's not this loss that affected me, but the silence on the other end of the phone. The nurse said I would lose a lot of blood, that it was not the sort of thing to go about on my own.

I bleed out half a bucket full of blood. It came out in clots part the size of a grown man's palm. I felt the pain of a sharp tool pressed against the edges of my womb. I told my God I was sorry and I promised to be good.

I think these are the sorts of wounds from which one proceeds onward, upward. From which one is simply relieved to carry on.

I thought somehow of your hands in the ocean, mahogany, lapis lazuli. The hands of a doctor, of a man who means well. I thought of your father slurring his speech on a wheelchair, of your mother playing the guitar.

But I think mostly of your hands, the hands you use to touch things, the hands you summon to paint. And I'm momentarily relieved of my guilt, of my shame, of the way my stomach turns when I think of you inside me.

It is hard to think of you without provoking some disdain, because you used all that was good in you to take what little you could have. Then I think of where you come from, and of the kind of place you were raised: how your sister was brutally raped - locked in a room too drunk -unresisting, where six men took their turns with her. Some of whom were probably your friends. And she is looking for a place to bury herself or she will burn everything instead.

Your sister tried to touch me, she reached her arm out in bed and stroked my back. And I leaped out of reach to grab a glass of water and thought of the skid marks you once left on my sheets. *How did I get here?* I asked myself. *There is something so unclean about your world.*

Sometimes I think your sister's in love with sin, sometimes I think you're in love with your sister.

I don't mean to go on about my body this way, but it remembers things that I've forgotten. My face is spotting and I've cut my hair in hopes that it might grow again, as it was; before your sister scrapped the skin off my neck, before you denied our wreck and disgraced me. I have broken down before, but never so evidently. Never with the weight of ten years on my body.

Perhaps I'll know I'm well when I no longer scratch the back of my ear, when I no longer peel my scabs before they've healed or curl up in my bed like a fetus. I'll know I'm well when the dark circles clear from around my eyes, when my lips no longer crevice like parched soil. When I no longer write of death and the torched body and my mind takes flight as it did before; when I would pluck a leaf with a long stem and have it stroke the edge of my jaw line or tickle the skin beneath my chin.

The trouble was that nothing felt sacred with you. Nothing was clean, nothing was honest. I had you paint a poet. I had you brush your teeth and clean your room. I gathered your trails of snotty tissue papers. I clipped your blistering toe nails. I'd fiddle with your bulging keloids, because they looked to me like the markings of some harsh force. And I did try, very hard, to make you into someone I could want. But that isn't love Kabugo, and I was tired and weak from this laborious love.

You want to experience my senses. To ground my work beneath its metaphysical reach, toward something solid, something sewn, something rooted in the soil and tangible. But I struggle to frame the texture of grain between my teeth, the pleasure. The scent of wet soil; the light of a setting sun fractured on scattered pieces of broken glass, on the grass, on the road, on the way to Grahamstown. I was so caught in the weight of my feelings, in the distance between he and I, I forgot to tell him it was beautiful; the succulents, the shrubbery, the mild heat and temperate winds.

But there are times when I struggle to find my senses, when gravity pulls me below common ground. Where I suffer to taste the salt or the seasoning in my food and I distance myself from what nourishes me. This is the state I was in when he tried to love me. It wasn't the fault of this town. There was no man who tried to rape me, I had no reason, I just broke down.

Many things we are prepared to accept only in their mystery. In their perfect folded forms. By the will of their boundaries, by the doubt in us all. Picture your wife as the daughter of a diplomat, imagine she is eloquent and smart. Versed in a hand full of languages but not quite fluent in her own. Picture her, lowering her eyes at a national conference, reading a book of poetic prose instead. This is your wife, this postured figure, this well versed entity, this beauty, this lie. This is your wife and she knows nothing of the soil, nothing of her father, nothing of toil. Of her mother, her saint protector from strenuous labor. *Your wife has never worked, she has never tried to work.*

This wife of yours has butter fingers, you'd have to rub your hands in dirt to hold her grip. You've had better luck on your knees washing the ground off her feet. *She'd only lift you from the floor for fear that it becomes you.* And she speaks so well, she writes, she dresses, and she promises that she loves you. She loves you despite how often she recoils at your touch, despite the other men that she writes to. She loves you so much she curses, and cries. This is your wife, this impenetrable beauty. This quivering structure of sheltered rage.

For months she wished you were dead, pictured you starved and hopeless. And you are aggrieved because in your simplicity you had pictured The Daughter of a Diplomat.

Chapter Ten -- The photographer

"When I left him, I didn't go near another man for two years. But that mysterious fidelity must have been to myself. "

- The Lover, Marguerite Duras

My brother spends the summer in Paris. He struggles for the first time to find a friend. He resents my ins and outs these days, and illustrates an anthropomorphic hare reading a book, eating chicken. "He has always drawn well," my mother says, "but this is the first time he has created."

The old man wants to teach her to take photographs. They meet outside the subway station Chatelets Les Halles. He jolts past the boom boxes and the men with skin like hers. He settles down around the corner, where there is less noise and more affording citizens. "It's much nicer here, no? Me, I prefer this, more civilized". He walks her to an old equipment store, and suggests she buys an analogue camera. The man at the store is beguiled by her. She has never been so wanted. She's beginning to think it is all his fault.

"You hurt me the other day," she tells him. "Why did you introduce me to your wife?" He says, "I want you in my life, so I must familiarize you with all that is in it." And she understands his heartless reasoning, she understands more than she is mature enough to withstand. "And anyways," he adds. "Now you are vaccinated." In other words, she thinks, she is better equipped to deal with this sort of pain again.

The photographer teaches her to adjust the aperture. He shows her how to focus the light in each shot. He wants to dictate what she finds beautiful and she wants to see the world as he does. She says, "I love the photo your wife took of that woman dancing on a bed." "Yes," he answers, "my wife is my best student." She realizes then, that she must strive to be good, never better. It is good that she is beautiful, and that she cannot be better because she is black. She says, "I thought your wife was a designer? She gave me a bracelet last time we met. She said when she was younger she wanted everyone to like her, and now she doesn't care."

The photographer agrees with admiration that his wife cares for no one but him. He says, "When I first met her, I thought she was typically Parisian, you know like this" he sticks his nose up in the air. "But after I see that she's not doing this to me. She's like a bitch to everyone, but not me...this I like." Her stomach crawls with envy. She does not know how to be unkind. "I don't think your wife likes me," she says. "But you are a bomb," he says. "Not many women will"

You don't understand it yet, because you are still a child and you've been told for the greater part of your life that you were too dark, too slender, that you were long and lanky like Popeye's wife. And here is a man who thinks that this is beautiful, and all his peers seem to agree. You are a bomb, you are a teacher, you are a keeper of secrets, a lover of night.

You've made it a habit to sell his photographs on the street. You sit there in the afternoons where many men stop to look. But it's always him that they're amazed by, even as they see you they are amazed by him. They see it as an honor to be seated by his side. They don't know how he transports you night after night. How you disconnect from your body and let him ride and let him cum.

One day you meet his father, and he looks at you like something edible. He pretends to slap his son, says to him, "you lucky bastard." His son laughs although he is unsettled. His father asks you out to lunch, while your love, your magnitude, stays behind and sells his photographs.

You sit with his father, you eat with his father, you see how in many ways he is his father's son. The old man says that he hates his father. Says his father would sleep with his wife if he could; tells you his father is more aggressive with his wife than he is with you; says, in other words, his wife is more beautiful than you.

"My father, he is bourgeois, you know. I remember once I went to my father's place with my girlfriend at the time, and I told him I would not be joining the army because I don't believe in education. He was there with his little bourgeois friends at the dinner party, and he points at me like this." The photographer stands casting his finger down like P.W Botha. "And he tells me, 'you will go to the army! You will go to school you little bastard! If you don't go I'll cut you off! And what will you do then huh?'" I got up from the table and told him he was an egoist, Il est pretentious, and I grabbed the table and flipped it over there with all his friends watching...took my girlfriend and left."

But you want to know what became of his girlfriend. Was she anything more than a prop? If he had any real respect for her would he disgrace his father while she watched?

My Lord,

The old man wants nothing to do with you. If I tell him that I kneel to you, if I confess that I am rich, he will turn me over like his father's table and fuck me like a whore. To him there is only the present, there is only beauty, light, and art. But my mother is still praying lord, she is praying on behalf of us both.

I want more from the photographer, and I've begun to weep needlessly. I call him in the night and cry when he doesn't answer. I refuse to be a secret, I lie about the things I have done. And he's beginning to resent that he cannot resist my body from behind.

He says I have two faces -- on one half I am powerful, and on the other I am a ruin. "Sounds just like a bomb," I laugh, but he remains intent with his arrows. He thinks I am manipulative and that it was my choice to accept these crumbs of love. He and his wife have agreed that I am an egoist and I shouldn't frown because it makes me ugly.

"I only love beauty," he says, "all my friends are beautiful."

I tell him that I love him. I ask him why he is being so unkind. I confess that I'm not happy, that ever since he'd touched me every man I've met has tried to do the same. "I feel like they can smell it! They can smell that I'm your whore!" I'm screaming at the top of my lungs because his shame is the only power I wield over him.

"You're just a child! And you are so dramatic!"

"And you're just a tired old man!"

The photographer's face is frozen, I've hit a nerve, but I feel bad the moment I realize it. "I'm sorry," I say, "I didn't mean it that way." But he tells me he is a caveman, he is a beast, and I cannot hurt him this way, not with words. "You have no idea how much I suffer," I weep. "I feel so alone".

He says "you know nothing about suffering. Suffering is having no place to stay. It's finding shelter with a grown man who tries to grope you in the night. It's running out into the street alone and naked. That's what it means to be alone, to have no one!" I reach over to touch his hand, but he pushes it away, "And anyways," he says "you say some men are trying to touch you, you must just keep shaking. Really he can't enter you if you are moving. Just shake, like this..." He wiggles me around and tickles me, and we laugh as though nothing was said.

Later on at night the old man tries to console me. He says he too knows what it's like to feel like prey. That he stayed in a monastery when he was twelve years old, where the head priest, his guardian, placed him on his lap, but he kicked the old man and ran away. "I was such a naughty child," he said laughing. "Really, he should have found a nicer boy to play with." And I just as suddenly realized that in order to see like him, I would have to have suffered like him too. That the photographer clung to light, obsessed over beauty because he had seen enough darkness and he had witnessed firsthand the vulgarity of men.

There is a photograph of her in a box. It stays hidden from the open. A photograph of her naked body covered in a translucent scarf. A moment of virtue captured minutes before its loss. She wants to see her photograph, she wants to see herself in his eyes.

She knows in the past the photographer has had his work hung up in the Louvre, and that the picture he has taken of her is his favorite. He says he has never photographed a black woman before, and he loves the contrast of his seed on the skin of her back. She fears sometimes while on a walk with her mother, that they might stumble across her body framed and purposefully naked.

But he is sure to let her know that there is nothing for her to fear - he will never show the world her photograph. He will keep her body hidden in a box. He reassures as he proceeds, casually, to take off her clothes. "I am cold," she tells him. "I have a fever, I need something warm." He denies her his duvet because it is what he will use when he sleeps with his wife. He says, "You don't have to move, you can just lie there." 'She imagines a set of horns protruding from his skull as he enters. And once again she meditates, or rather, systematically uproots her soul from its shell. But he hates the face she wears when she is dead inside, so he flips her over fucks her from behind.

She pictures the old man as a boy stark naked on the road. She considers the severity of his options. Was it better for him to surrender to the cold, or to suffer the loss of his body?

Sometimes you feel the old man has protected you. You are selective in the stories you choose to share. You prefer to mention how he dived in search of his opium when, after serious examination, you'd dropped it on the floor - *wondering what it must feel like to float as he does*, seated across from you beside his dealer. The two of you, the dealer and yourself, look up and down but never at each other. To do so would be as audacious as to acknowledge the fact that you are both black. Instead, you listen as the old man warns you against opium. How he simply could not conscience your addiction on his hands.

But of course he eats it in your presence, and he is such a joy to behold when he is high. He tells you he had to lock himself up in a forest for over a year to break free of his addictions. "What happened after a year?" you ask him. "I started taking heroin," he replies. You learn that he met his wife while he was recovering from heroin. She heard of his genius, his dubious reputation, and felt drawn to him like a moth pulled haphazardly towards the light. He sees that she is pretty but he is unmoved. Until one night, she tries on a white dress she's made. She is a young fashion designer and she wears her dress for his consideration. "She just looked so pretty," he says, mockingly. But she is not a beauty you commiserate, she is not a bomb.

He tells you how he moved in to kiss her, how she received his kiss with warmth. They had spent two weeks together by the time she decided to tattoo his name on her wrist. And when he decided to move back to India, she just as easily decided to leave her job. "She spent six weeks looking for me!" he says. But you are beginning to doubt the way he has put things. "How did she find you?" you ask. "Well emails things like this..." he says. "So you did plan for her to come? She didn't just find you?" But he has moved on to less revealing testimonies. Stories in French, stories for his dealer, stories for you to wonder and be perplexed. And you're starting to wonder whether his mother really was a Corsican Princess, whether his family had four castles, or if he'd actually spent two weeks in a cave without food or water. Was it true, for instance, that he maintained his composure as a black Indian Cobra raised its head to meet his gaze? You never take the time to scrutinize his stories or give notice of your doubt, because the truth was never as important to you as understanding what it was he was trying to say.

And you will remind yourself in the end that in his own way the old man had tried to protect you. He taught you firsthand how to hold a camera, and avoid being the subject of its lens.

Chapter Eleven -- The Tea Drinker

Mother , Meter, Matter

I am a tea drinker. Third in line from my grandmother. I've taken to drinking tea instead of whiskey, and the medication lets me sleep long hours. And I carry myself through the world as if it were a dew, as if I were indoors and insulated like dusk around a fire nearing the end of autumn.

When my mother wants to drink tea, I sit with her. She is regal, austere, she cups my heart in her hands. She says I have no idea what she has been through, the things she's seen, and I get the feeling I've been crying over nothing. She says, I must learn to handle money that, that is by far what kills us most. The mishandling of money, I think, to sort out one's affairs. The deadening world of money and half-lived dreams. My heart is thumping as she speaks - how do I learn to handle money I have not yet learned to earn. I am frightened; the risk that I might live a lowly life, to have to drink to numb this material pain, to be deprived of flight and beauty, sodded in a reality that is harsh and mundane. I dread to be in a world where I cannot speak at length about the fragrance of hand lotion. I imagined once that I was humble because I could speak to the core of anyone and listen without being caught. But I'm the worst of all snobs because I am frightened, and I'm afraid of my own home.

My mother recommends chamomile for the thumping of my heart. It beats like the board game in Jumanji. I place my hand on my chest, I take deep breaths. When we are drinking tea we feel simple, but it is the sort of simplicity one can only afford. It puts us at ease to drink something warm in the chill of an air-conditioned mall...like hot water to the monk in his monastery, or the potter in his cold studio. But of late, there is something sickening in these malls which cave our afternoon tea houses. The children of wealthy men, bored from lack of strife. To live a dream you have not dreamt, to be spoilt, to be goal-less. To speak at length about the fragrance of hand lotion. I feel as though I have no soul. I only wanted to be safe and not to be excluded from beauty. I have lost my sense of the ordinary. I write incomplete but poetic prose.

I try to remember that my brother is good, he only speaks this way because he is aching. He remembers the chauffeurs, the city of lights, The Louvre, the Tate Modern, the abundance of our youth.

We lived a life that was partially ours, but it was long and plentiful, it had oceans of serendipity. We had the luxury of art without the boundaries of income. And although coming home was grounding, it came at the cost of the sky.

This is the pain of our present, it weighs on us and he is acting out in spite. He doesn't paint or draw or work at all. He doesn't do a thing which does not instantly please him. Sometimes I slam his door and jolt away just to aggravate his senses. Sometimes I want to call a friend and speak at length of his stagnation.

How little we've achieved in all the time we've spent away. We might have been better positioned if we were at ease with our equality. My mother has tried to demonstrate how to live irrespective of oneself. She made it such that we were once so well received, and our people made efforts to see us, and we would speak of our experiences abroad disregarding her efforts. They look at us now like clay, well reserved, unformed, and possibly useless.

Chapter Twelve -- Taproots

*"Trying to revive tradition is like raising a ladder to climb
a wall that fell down"*

- Fernando Pessoa, Book of Disquiet

I am trying to make sense of dying. The death of my mother's oldest friend, his death from pancreatic cancer. Now the death of a mother of two, ill prepared for her passing. They sit in a garage clouded in smoke, surrounded by smoke, drinking, reeking. And I'm summoning all the parts that compose my sobriety. Sometimes dealing with death feels like dying.

There was the death of my grandfather, almost a century old. Then the death of a father to a boy crippled in a crash that killed his mother. All these deaths tolled in the span of year: The death of an avenue, the death of a path away from this country. I want to illustrate the Dark Continent with a thousand hands pulling on a dwindling thread, trying to get out, trying to remember: This land belongs to the ones who saved it, the rest of us dream of being elsewhere.

But it is a kind of sickness, isn't it? To be more at ease outside of one's home. I see the symptoms in those that have gone - something in their voice, a slight fixtured in their accents. But there is, for those of us who've remained, a certain zealous, a sudden tilt towards the heavens: The churches, the prayer groups, the woman in blue robes perched beneath the trees. Heaven is the promise of relocation. It is a scholarship abroad. They are all praying to be elsewhere, and they will worship those with the means to go.

But perhaps they pray because the soul and the psyche are the same. Because we are as vulnerable to ourselves as we are to malevolent spirits in the air. What took my mind, I wonder. Was it in dealing with death, with dying? Was it in trying to love at the cost of my body? Or was it a whisper that pronounced itself in the space between my prayers?

You reek, you repulse: Your tongue, your teeth, your taste, your ugly.

Trauma: is letting a dark skinned ape from the continent fuck the life from you

Lies: are convincing yourself in some universe you would want to spend your life with it

Truth: searching yourself for good -- not finding it....hiding it. Bent on your knees in feigned repentance only to create distance from yourself and the heavens.

I saw the Lords shadow build a moat around my enemies. It hurt much more to see my pain as a sword aimed against the light.

They are God's creatures, the Ape, the Rapist, the Silent Depredator, the Women with their claws, with their whispers. God's creatures guarded by the shadow of God.

We drove past fields of litter
And houses built from tin.
Intestines sold at the street corner,
A river dammed in dirt.

And I feared that it would stick to me,
Drag me down like muddy soil,
Like strife.

That my skin might darken in the sun,
My features wither,
My beauty gone.

This is what I felt as we drove by.
It's what they'll see when they look at me.
They'll see fields of litter in my skin,
In my mother,
In our accents.

I felt the edge of my fingers tingle, then the pit of my stomach contract. I wondered what it would take for my body to collapse. I closed the curtains; watered my plants.

I thought first about spring in Barcelona, about Casola and his quiet heart. I thought most of the ways that good things start.

I realized from far away it was hard to tell if a man was black or white, but something small would say, be it their hips or their height. Perhaps it was that the white man never looked aimless. He would pace or ponder or fasten his lace, he was either about to go somewhere or somehow already there.

Why do black men linger in the shade of the park or lay on their backs on someone else's lawn, or sit on a bucket in the parking lot - doing nothing but always at work.

Why are white women always crying, or curling the hairs behind their ears, or holding a book, or carrying a jumper; why the brown bags, the bare feet, the training gear.

Why do black women wear ballerina's shoes in the winter and drag their feet behind the counter. Why do white women make a show of being polite to each other? Why are they so polite only to each other?

I know my life is dull when I can't see the grey. When the world appears in accent colors.

My brother wishes his beard would grow like Osama Bin Laden's. My mother marvels that the Prince of England has mother-in-law with dread-locks. And I wonder when the ice caps will finish melting, when the world will tilt off its axis, and if a great tide will sweep over Denmark.

I'm lonely. I am alone. There is a cluster of clean sheets tangled with worn clothes on the floor. There are Rice Krispies under my pillow. And who knows where all the happiness goes; I search for it on the other end of the phone:

Where the cucumber says that he is a person, that I broke his heart, that I reaffirmed his pain by not knowing how I caused it. But I didn't know he had a heart. I thought all he had was little crystals in his chest which occasionally made the sound of cracking glass.

These days I feel a peace returning; this renewed sense of purpose; this return to God; this restored boundary; this refusal to plummet into any kind of dank submission - nor to any man, nor any company that threatens to reduce me, not even to my sleep in the early morning. And I write. What a gift it is to be a writer: It is the mother of my madness, my in-silence, my raft.

Chapter Thirteen - The Company of Woman

*"A woman alone creating
Is not a beautiful spectacle."*

-- Anais Nin

ESME

1

I met Esme during a language program, learning French at the Sorbonne. We are beginners, debutants, she sits behind me and lends me her pen. She orders a French onion soup during our lunch break, and I tell her I enjoy simple food, cozy food, like butter on toast, like gravy, like porridge. "Yes", Esme agrees, "I quite like peasant food". She has a colonial accent, bright blue eyes, with pale English skin and little furs at the edge of her lips.

2

Esme seems to have the sort of wealth which materializes in envelopes. Her mother sends her lumps of cash for her phone credit, for her rent, for her tabac, her filters, and rolling papers. She lives in an apartment with a Japanese designer. He is old and superficial, and you're surprised to meet an old man who behaves this way. He receives you in quiet disapproval like the stern silence of the photographer's wife, and you are beginning to think it's possibly an Asian thing, or a Parisian thing, or perhaps it's an Asian Parisian thing.

You don't quite understand what causes people to react to you this way. Why for instance, Koji, relates to you like a rodent hovering over his meal. You've never felt so despised by a stranger. You've hardly even spoken. You are tempted to assume that he is a racist, but he hates you too much to consider you inferior. So you study him, try to win him over. You achieve far better results when you pretend he isn't there.

3

Esme presents poached eggs and toasted croissants for breakfast. She is wearing a transparent white shirt, white socks, and her eyes look a clear blue like the shallow end of the ocean. The hairs on her legs are a long and dirty blond. She never shaves them, and I can't yet tell whether I'm repulsed or inspired. "I really want a French boyfriend," she says. "Is that what you are here for?" I wonder. "Isn't that what we're all here for?" she answers. "I don't know." I tell Esme, "I'm not a fan of uncircumcised dicks. I hate how they go soft like an earthworm folding back into a sock." Esme laughs out loud, bold, unshaven, and I come to a quiet conclusion that it is the company of woman I prefer.

LITTLE LANEY

1

You've cut your hair, and given yourself to the study of your improvement. The university is pleased with your work, and you are in pursuit of publication. Nothing says to you that you should be impressed let alone acquainted with a busty blond with fair skin, with eyes a peridot green. You look at her, her height, her beauty, you look away at something else - a white board, a wooden floor, a hard covered book by Tony Judt. She is young, you think to yourself, she is yet to be fucked from all sides, by all types. The lecturer recites a quote in German, his nose in the air, his hands moving. He doesn't seem to mind that we don't care let alone understand him.

2

When did the busty blond become your friend? Was it when she saw your paintings? Was it when she read your poetry, or pitied you for being on your own? You call her little Laney because she is young, and because she reminds you of some benevolent Disney princess. She saves you a seat in every class, talks at length about art history, about her love for Bernini, confusing knowledge for devotion. She seems silly at first, she is far too concerned with her appearance. She is warm but remains a liability to the image you are creating of yourself.

3

I am black and I am decent, and I care only about my work. I only speak when it is necessary, and I make my presence scarce because it weighs. But there is something heavy at the other end of my scale.

Eleni collects copies of the university's literary journal. My poems have been published and she reads them to her friends. Now the painter sits beside me, and the busty blonde has become my friend. But they don't know what I am. They don't know how I behave when I am frightened.

They will invite me out for dumplings, to exhibitions at the Pompidou, and I'll tell them that I'm sick or stoned, or lost my phone in my covers. I find this popularity absurd, and more to do with not knowing me at all. I kiss myself, my loneliness. I know a flame will not burn on its own

ISABEL BERNSTIEN

1

I've taken a semester of Psycho-analysis. I want to know myself, exploit my sudden studiousness. I read forty pages a night - essays on child development, I read even when I don't understand.

But I'm at odds with the science of it all, because something in my spirit is burning. I'm not troubled by my wrong, but by the sin in my blood. I want to answer my madness. I want to know what part of my pain is my inheritance.

Isabel is a Psych Major, and on top of all our readings. She doesn't believe in God but ascribes some divinity to the universe, to nature, to the tantric folding of her body. Her confidence is sharp, un-armored. She fucks a Nigerian boy during orientation. He clings to her without cause and walks as though he's about to fall over. When he calls her, she does not answer and his pain manifests itself as rage.

I relate to her as my equal. We speak in harsh and serious tones. But if she saw me as I am now -- a thing of shambles, barely half of what I was, I wouldn't feel ashamed to meet her or to tell her what I've done.

2

"I don't know", I say to Isabel, I announce all my discoveries this way. "I feel like if I met the man of my dreams he wouldn't like me. At least not as I am right now ``"Then why would he be the man of your dreams?" She asks. Because, I should say, I despise myself more profoundly in my sleep. I dream of the ease of spring - a circle of men laughing, of the seriousness in my expression, of a child plagued with the obligation to play. "It occurs in that order" I tell her, "like slides on a power point presentation." Isabel proposes that we travel to India. The fears in her dreams present a rug being swept out from under her feet. She pictures her body falling, but can't conceptualize the ground beneath her feet. The floors in her apartment are a dark timber, herringbone wood, so that I imagine her descend onto severed pieces of the earth. "You'll be alright" I tell Isabel," and I would love to go to India."

In India I am blacker than the black suit in the cemented chimneys of Paris. A Dalit woman cleaning the toilets at customs, New Deli Airport, taps Isabel on the shoulder and asks how she became my friend. "We go to school together" Says Isabel," but you can ask her yourself, she is right here." The Dalit looks at Isabel as if she'd summoned her modest reasoning from some place beneath the soil. She doesn't imagine ever speaking to me, she is surprised Isabel would.

We take four buses from New Deli, up to Banga, Maneli, and into a small village in the Himalayan range. We spend two weeks sun gazing, taking cold showers, warming goats' milk and oatmeal. The landlord's son leaves blocks of wood for us to warm our cabin in the evenings. His wife has left us dinner moments before. He doesn't know we have met her, he stares a while at Isabel's legs. "The food was lovely," I intervene "who made it?" He pauses for a while and answers "I did." And I look at Isabel smiling, I whisper, "Someone has neglected to mention his wife." Isabel laughs because she's noticed and she enjoys the company of men.

North of India, the men have fair brown skin and luminous eyes, they share a border with Nepal, and we deduce it might be the reason they appear so pronounced. They are few, and beautiful. The Landlords son, Nyerandra, is unusually handsome. He has taken a liking to Isabel, and I assume it's because she is white. It may not be the case with them, but I'll find on many occasions, one merely needed to be white and willing, perfectly situated in a remote and scarcely visited part of the developing world. Nerandra brings us wood and oil for the fire, promises to take us to Ladak once the roads clear. He suggests we return over the summer. I want to return ready to spend the rest of my life.

ESME

1

Esme and I bond over our mutual disdain for phonetics classes. Often we'll carry on after lunch as if they aren't there. "Walk me to the post office?" said Esme, "mums had something sent". She spoke of her mother as if she were ours. I found it strange but didn't mention it.

It later occurred to me that Esme never really asked for things. Her tone of voice would insinuate a proposal, but I hardly had a choice in the matter. I soon found myself crippled by her camouflaged demands, her refinery, and her preferred choice of steak tartar.

I would find myself in The Baron helping her search the bar for cocaine; or holding a cubicle door shut as she wrapped toilet paper around her underwear; or seated between a couple who had discussed and agreed that it would be a great pleasure to have me in bed. And as I begin to wonder whether the French have not in fact marinated their morals in the gutter, in the distance there is Esme pretending to suck a man off in jest. She considers it a kind of dance. She is puzzled by his rectangular retraction. But I am transfixed by her audacity, and I make it clear to all who disapprove that I've come here with Esme. She is above judgment, she is above man and beyond.

2

Esme wants a French boyfriend. She is soon to learn how undomesticated French men can be. She wants a man and I want a friend. We are both better at achieving what the other wants. But the ease at which Esme meets a boy by accidentally leaving her credit card in his tabac. All this because she was drunk, and because her skirt barely covered her butt, and because she refused to wear underpants, proclaiming the importance for an artist to be vulgar. And how the photographer hated vulgarity. It was the reason I return to him often. It was the reason I held on to his photographs and never criticized the absurdity of his love.

I told Esme about the photographer, she was the first with whom I'd mentioned him. I colored him in a manner that seemed attractive, but I doubt they would have gotten along. The photographer walked into my home and saw five floors and threatened to reduce me. "My family had four castles," he said, "places like this but bigger." "It's too large," I responded in modesty, "I prefer a more intimate space." The photographer insisted on my place. He brought a model to my home and had us photograph him. I realized then that I had something the old man had lost. That this would disfigure the shape of our love. We would eat at cafes where he'd ask that I pay, then he'd scoff at my privilege and remind me of the places he had stayed

The odd thing was, I never spoke to the old man about Esme yet I was equally dismantled by them, equally half received. But because Esme never wanted anything from me, I felt to an honest degree that she was my friend. She'd say that I was far too generous and constantly at risk of being used. And I tried very hard not to ask anything of her, even with the knowledge that she had the budget to fund a film in Tokyo, or that her closest friend was the granddaughter of Mick Jagger, or that she'd spent the summer holiday at his home in India, that she was unraveling and was at any minute capable of falling apart.

The trouble was that I had always been torn. I didn't belong in his world, and I didn't belong in hers. Although Esme and I had both acquired a certain distance to the world... I found that hers was birthed from a scarce familiarity with ordinary things, with ordinary people. While mine was coupled with a lack of similitude and a fear of things which weighed. I realized more than ever now, that what I wanted most was to belong. But this state of being in-between, of finding oneself above or below a tolerable standard, required a better sense of sureness.

Esme's French was beginning to improve while I continued to cut classes to see the photographer. And on the days I couldn't see him, I would sink into my pillow and deprive myself of food.

THE PAINTER

1

She is a painter, a failed ballerina, a gifted student, a counter of coins. Nothing about her threatens me, but I envy her composure. She is consistent in her diligence, and she doesn't struggle as I do with her mood. I feel that I'm on the verge of falling apart and she is ready to replace me. I feel it more especially because I am black when she is white.

2

The Painter begrudges all her figures of beauty. She makes strange and quirky remarks to distinguish herself from her friends. I envy that her French is decent, but she only speaks when certain she is correct. And she hates little Laney because she is rich, more especially because she is beautiful. But the busty blonde has a heart made of gold, and such a thing cannot be contrived or replicated. That's another thing she couldn't understand. That these trinkets of God were not to be coveted. The first chord of communion is severed between The Painter and I when she is positioned as editor of the university's publication and excludes my poems from the following edition. She struggles to mask her smile as she delivers the news. How subtle she is, how overt I am in my reaction.

3

I have a roommate, and I believe at first that he is my friend. I live with him because I'm exhausted by the company of women. We take long walks and discuss American politics. He ignites the parts of me preoccupied with power. He considers my empathy a weakness and disdains me the moment he reads my work. He begins leaving papers on my bed justifying the war in Palestine; on the benefits of Apartheid; and the exaggerated claims of police brutality in the United States. When I appear unprovoked he insists on the defamation of God. He'll blast podcasts on Atheist epistemology over the speakers in the apartment, so that I must shower three times a day to filter the noise.

The Politician and The Painter will soon derive pleasure in watching me implode as my womb becomes a graveyard, when I've aborted another child. My roommates' cat sits on my belly and growls as I revisit a pain so deep it does not cry. I adopt a taste for whisky. I prefer sitting in the dark. I return to my studies in diapers to find the dancers' paintings framed on the walls of the library, and I sink into the fear that I am falling and that she has begun to take my place.

LITTLE LANEY

1

The landlord hands me an early eviction twelve hours before my flight. It is in moments like these that you count your friends, you count most of all on your instincts. I call little Laney with her golden heart, she has prepared a pot soup and a bottle of wine when I arrive. Kindness, I maintain, is the highest form of intelligence.

2

You don't understand why I write this way. Why I chose to speak of some and not of others. The truth is my neurosis is not linked to any trauma, it is a symptom of my art. And I speak mostly of the people that shaped it, the figures which forged a dagger in my heart, and little Laney who taught me something else, something saintly, something closer to light.

3

She forgives her father for trying to blind her, for watching her as she sleeps, for holding his weight over her body as a child, for hurting his daughter, for bruising his wife. She visits this broken man in a monastery where he has decided to live the rest of his life. She says, she prays he finds a way to forgive himself for damage he has done.

ESME

1

All these days of no food or sunlight are making me slim, pale, and ultimately more beautiful. But I've become increasingly petrified of being seen or touched. I curl up into corners of Esme's house where Koji delights and disgust at my inwardness. I've begun to fiddle with a razor. I enjoy the crisp friction of an almost cut. And I find it enormously difficult to unfold from this awkward crouch.

2

I run into a freckled beauty. I gaze at her so long she begins to question my orientation. "Do you like women?" Esme asks on her behalf. "It's okay if you do, I've slept with a woman before." I tell her I find the vagina almost as uncanny as an earlobe, that I should probably familiarize myself with my own before pursuing any other. "You're so funny," says Esme, handing me a glass of water with a drop of acid. She offers me a lemon meringue with vanilla ice-cream. I gobble it down in savagery, impressed.

Esme introduces me to Cici Jagger. She is short but elegant, and she has taken the better parts of her mother's features. I don't know yet who Cici is, but I notice how considerate Esme is towards her. It was my impression before that Esme was crude and indecent because she was free spirited and wondrously brave. I realized now, in the manner she related to her friend, that it was simply that she did not have much respect for me. Around Cici there were no drugs, no drunken stupor, no midriff skirts, or artistic vulgarity. There were no period stained underwear thrown out on the floor. Koji too was welcoming of Cici, even extending his civility to me.

Cici is completing her third year in herbology. She's dating a boy recovering from substance abuse. She and Esme discuss her tendency to lean towards men who need to be cared for. They go on this way about boys, about dates, as I try to pretend to be the sort of person who could have at one point related. But my only experience with men at this stage is with an old man and the view of his window. "Who are you seeing right now?" Cici asks. I look down re-assuming my embryonic pose, muffling the words that come out of me. Cici reconsiders her position on the couch, Koji has begun to roll his eyes, Esme decides to boil asparagus in the kitchen, and as I try to funnel my way through this seemingly simple question, I feel the scatter of warm bodies clearing away like a colony of Amazonian ants at the sudden spore of a cordisec fungi.

My days with the old man have turned me inward and I've gradually shredded into skin and bone. By the end of the year I will feel pain on the blade of my collar bone as I lean against a wall, and one can easily discern my rib cage protruding where once was flesh and supple breasts. The oddity of it all was how good it felt to be starving and how positively men responded.

THE PAINTER

1

My brother says I cannot see myself. That if I could I would arm myself with better friends. "What did they do to Snow White!" he says, "What did they do the Esmeralda? If Cinderella told her step sisters she was going to the ball do you think they would have let her? You can't ask for permission to belong...Just look at you! Look at them! " I don't understand what my brother is saying, and like so many, he is under the impression I feign this oblivion. "Man, I'm not telling you this again." He says, "Just own what you are, and stop asking them to, they won't!"

"What do you mean?" I scream, "Why can't you just say what you mean!" I begin bursting into tears when he can't explain why the old man, why everyone leaves me. "Everything that nears, disappears" I whimper, "This is going to happen again. I can feel it" My brother tells me these were never my friends. That one never really loses their friends. But I can feel the crisp of a cold flame ignite inside me. An impossible rage. A bullet and prayer.

2

I tell the painter that her work lacks sincerity, that I see her skill but not her passion. It is the way I feel, but I only say it to injure. I want her to doubt her vocation, then herself, and her place above me. Pain makes us cruel. Makes us small and angered. She tells me she likes to paint, but her dream was to be a dancer. "I lost that" says the painter, "and everything else feels secondary. I was the best in my class. I will never be the best at anything else." She speaks so sincerely, reducing me to a cinder. We found a neglected space in an old hotel, and I gave her my audience as she demonstrated what remained of her talent. The dancer suffered from chronic pain in her back. Her spine was twisted, her movements were slight, and I am envious watching her struggle to take flight. She has no idea how much this pain will elevate her.

ISABEL BERNSTIEN

1

Something I've grown to dis-admire are women posturing the sentiments of men. Desplicable as it is, I understand when it is used to assume power, but not when the objective is simply to seduce or to forge comradely in the company men. I wish sometimes that Isabel didn't gain so much satisfaction from being admired. I wish she could admit to her bleeding body, to her want of unconditional love. I'm exhausted with her pretense. I want a moment on my own to write. Isabel takes a walk with Nyerandra. They are gone long enough for me to string together a tale of a girl who hovers in spirit and watches over her mother.

2

Somewhere in the silence I have begun to dislike my brother. He doesn't see that the kinder I am the more distant I become. I realize he doesn't know me. He has already decided who I am. But it's not his fault, most people do that. It is a way to temper the earth, to reduce all its mysteries. Isabel too, negates everything I say, especially with regards to my suffering. She must find its material cause, because for her, only the universe can be ambiguous. She has picked up a book of defining terms in Sanskrit literature and has determined from her reading that I lack the effortless, playful relation between myself and the Absolute. That I am too severe and therefore at odds with the contingent world. "You lack silliness" she says. "The concept of Lila emphasizes the role of delight in creation."

"You realize Isabel, that you never ask anything about me, and each time I try to communicate it you dismiss it for something else. Do you think I'm always wrong? Are you not interested in knowing me?" Isabel is smart. She dodges her fallibility with logic. She says "It's been my observation that when people ask you personal questions you withdraw. So I don't want to push it. You should probably consider the possibility that you don't want to be known."

"Everybody wants to be understood" I say to Isabel, "But I've never known how to play. It's like I can see it, I know what I'm supposed to do, but it is fun for other people and it is an effort for me. It's easier as you get older, but as a child you're really not allowed to be serious."

"We should go out! Take a walk!" Says Isabel. "You go, I'll join you later" I reply. I want to be alone where I can write, where I can fold.

ESME

1

We walk through the shade of a park - Esme, Koji, and I. There are carnations in the sky and the grass is crawling up my feet. We are high, but Koji and Esme seem fine. I lie on the grass as it becomes me.

These days, I tell them, I let things carry me. We wander through a museum with sky roofs and dinosaur fossils. Through a catacomb of precious stone; Amethyst, peridot, lapis lazuli, fire opal.

2

I wake to the stroke of a hand going down my back. It lingers there before making its way around my torso. I turn to find Koji behind me, shirtless, flipping his hair back as he often does. I'm in shock, but I've worked too hard to win his favour so I lay back a while longer - deliberate. "Is everything okay?" Koji asks. "Yes, I'm just really thirsty." I reply. I head over to the kitchen for a glass of water. I stayed there for a while calling a cab. By the time I get to Koji's room he has fallen asleep. Relieved...I gather my things and leave.

I tell the cab driver I am hot and that I can't stand the weight of my clothes. He fixes his eye on his center mirror as I peel down the sleeves of my shirt. "You want I touch you?" He asks. "I don't know," I reply, contorting my head around, boiling, "I don't know what I want..." This is true of my body, this is true of every part of my life.

The cab driver places his hand between my legs as we arrive. He looks me in the eye and withdraws his touch. As I exit he waits to see that I've entered safely. I crawl into bed, I curl my body in, I succumb to the unfolding of geometrical shapes.

3

Soon the photographer will decide on his move to India. He leaves with his wife and their newborn daughter. Soon Esme too will be gone. And I will have no alternative other than to read and to write, and to try again at learning a language. These days of abandonment teach me that the act of leaving is a brisk and permanent gesture.

But I will come to terms with this perennial state of loss, this independence. Ask any man who ever wrote to meditate on his labour. He'll tell you of his days spent alone, how there was no one there he could talk to.

THE WRITER

1

One day you become a writer. It happens just as suddenly as a girl catching lice. You read a book which Esme has leant you and hold on to it in hope that she'll ask for it back. You recall how she liked to read smiling so as not to sink into the sallow hold of the subject at hand. You think of Esme, blue eyed, smiling, as proof that you are more than a body, more than your behind.

At your best, before everything, you held her up from falling swollen and drunk stringing a man attached to her purse, and the two of you would laugh over a Bloody Mary in the morning about how she got caught stealing a book for no good reason except that she could. After all, she would say, one only ever did what they could. But you could not have gotten away with that. Not with the skin of a mamba, not in France.

2

Somedays you think of the old man. Some days you think of Esme. One day you sew together each pain and you write *The Night is An Old Friend*. Your teacher is surprised by your wisdom. "To capture the spirit of an old man like that," he says, "at your age that's quite remarkable." But you consider yourself rather old and unmoving - it is your first year at University, you are twenty-one and your peers are teenagers.

Somehow the photographer has taken your voice along with him to India. And you never speak, you never stay long enough to mingle. A tall dark haired man is speaking to you in code. He wants to know the source of your poetry. He is the most beautiful, towering structure you have ever seen and you worry as he nears that a part of you might leave a stain. He tries, but doesn't know how to touch you, he tells himself you are untouchable, and you'll indeed remain a thing untouched for many years.

3

As you continue to write without saying a word you become a thing of wonder and praise. They cannot know you, you say to yourself again. To know you is to leave you. You write everyday up and away from this pain.

4

You sketch a man in prayer with charcoal out from a portrait in the Louvre. You borrow a classmate's fixative half way through. You rush out to buy a resold ticket for Leonard Cohen's last tour. You recall how the photographer loved him. How he'd look at you - intent to bruise singing:

May everyone live/
May everyone die/
Hello my love/
And my love goodbye /

You've paid an arm and a leg but consider him worth it. In memory of the old man. In memory of light.

5

I paid three hundred and twelve Euro's to see a musician on his last tour.

I stood there, outside L'Olympia where autumn varied the attire, as Esme paced the streets looking for a generous Reseller.

I help her find one; he's a little sun kissed man aggressive in nature only prepared to sell for three hundred euros. Esme thinks it's overpriced (though she can afford it). In her attempt to bargain, she succeeds only in angering him.

She soon finds another, tall and bronzed in the light. He's prepared to sell at a lower price, so we use him as collateral. In approaching the little man again, before we'd even said a word he screams, "Don't talk to me if you have no money! Three hundred or nothing!"

I'm about to ask why he's so angry, but he's screaming. "Go back to your country! Go back to Africa! People in your country don't have food! People in your country are starving! Your people have nothing!"

Esme finds it all a little amusing but she has enough sense to stiffen her smile as she shouts, "You peasant!" asking me to ignore him, relieved if I should forget.

She finally buys a ticket from the more generous of the dealers and we enter side by side. We're seated close enough to hear an old poet in song hum a fine base at every stanza and count all the lines on his face. Though I never do forget.

I know my skin is a dark mahogany; it guards me from harsh light, at times placing me beside Esme other times reducing me below a dealer on the road. On grey hours it saddens me, but most days I'm rather grateful for its discipline.

6

When I was younger I wanted everyone to like me. Now that I am older, I don't care.

Chapter Fourteen -- Hayley Jane

*"Man deludes himself when he thinks he is leading his own life
For his soul is irresistibly drawn to its fate."*

-- Herman Hesse

I submit a poem in my creative writing class. It's about a tall dark haired man, or should I say a boy, smoking a cigarette out in the cold, talking to a fine young ginger, waving his hands in speech like he meant something. I show it to Hayley and a group of young men who are couch surfing at her place. One of them stares un-shaking at my lips then steadily draws himself closer. He wants to hear more of my work, and each time I read his body nears. Until I must pull open a window and reach out for air, where autumn too is nearing. There is a wind caught between the branches of what looks like a maple tree.

Hayley is pleased to learn that I can write, she is both pleased and competitive of the attention it inspires. She pulls out her guitar, flips it upside down and plays it left handed. This process is so automatic for her, she doesn't notice how impressed we've become. She has taught herself to play classically, fingering each string as if to pay homage to her Spaniard. Hayley sings a song she wrote before moving to Paris. She relates to us the sentiments behind her song. We accommodate this prologue out of courtesy, but we are far better moved by her voice: coarse and unearthly, her words were home bread - American Folk - though she played traditional Spanish Guitar.

I thought Hayley was talented but that she needed to grow into her words. I remember saying something to that effect. That she was singing about something she would have liked to feel, someone she imagined herself being. And I didn't doubt that she could someday become this person, I just thought she would sound a lot better if she actually was. Perhaps then she wouldn't have to close her eyes in feign affection, because her words would be real and they would transmit naturally as she sang.

In hindsight, I see how this was wrong. I see it more especially now that I recall singing her song soon after, pulling the air from my stomach, adding power to my voice in a manner that made it clear to myself and to others that I was better, I was Black. Dark as the skin on my forehead, black as the hairs under my arms. I wanted to demonstrate to her what that sounded like. But what I'd done instead was collect her applause, and I felt for a moment, a slight severing of cords.

Moments with Hayley were beginning to feel uncoordinated. She would hang out with her couch surfing friends, her lovers, and forever changing band mates, and I'd constantly arrive to find a new group of strangers comfortably living in her apartment. She'd go on about her travels and the things that she'd learnt from the men in her life, but confined me to her apartment, or at best the boulangerie across the road. "We never go anywhere," I said. "I feel like you are always telling me about your adventures, about the Spaniards or whatever... But I've never met these people, wouldn't it be nice to go out for a change?" I considered for a moment that Hayley didn't owe this to me, she was not my partner, but she was the only person at the time I considered a friend. I would never make that known to her, but it came out in moments such as these. "Agh, I was supposed to meet Augustine tonight, but I canceled on him again... I'm just worried I'll go out and run into him or something," said Hayley.

I had completely forgotten about Augustine. Augustine who covered his spots with foundation, Augustine who insisted on putting his pajamas on before bed, Augustine who lived in the sixteenth arrondissement, who did not frequent the Bellevilloise, who couldn't cradle a cold wolf in the night like a Spaniard. "Argh Augustine," Hayley would say, never without a sigh or a hint of disgust. I tell her I once loved a man like Augustine. Perhaps not so privileged as he was, but equally tame and ignorable.

"Where was your boyfriend from?" asked Hayley. "He was Catalan" I replied. I'd spent a year in Barcelona, where I discovered my capacity to live outside of my mother's home. I discovered that I could write, and that it was possible after all to carry on. Hayley wants to see a photograph of my ex, and she's surprised to learn that he is beautiful. His lips are plum, his eyes bright green. "He looks manufactured by God" She says, nearing her eyes to his photograph. "How did you get bored of this guy?"

"I don't know," I replied. Although it was possibly the distance, or the numbing from our unborn child. I tell her, "I think I'm just not used to being that loved. I think I prefer to be with someone older."

"I love young men," said Hayley. "Young, beautiful, curious men. But not the pubescent sort of beauty, you know, the kind which seems almost artificially preserved or unexposed to sunlight. Have you seen that scene in the titanic, where Jack takes rose below the deck of the ship and you can see all these people dancing and living! Truly living! Making due with what's left from above. And he tells her 'these are the rats', like quite literally the rats living underground, pulsed to live as opposed to the bored and suffocated people luxuriating above ground. That's what I want, you know. I want to be with the rats! The rats! I would respect the kind of beauty that could emerge from such a place. Like the Spaniards' beauty. He is like Man and Wolf. He has the Gentlest of eyes, but his hands are rough...well maybe not rough, more weathered. His hands are weathered. He has the sort of hands that could sculpt you."

When I got home I would vent to my brother about how this girl Hayley really romanticized poverty. "She's so delusional," I'd say. "You should hear how she talks, it's like she thinks this is in the movies."

"She seems a lot like you," my brother said, and I stared intensely in his direction determined to revert this opinion. "Just look at it this way," he said, "When that way of thinking is well directed you are able to create worlds of your own, just as you do in your writing."

But I don't want to be like Hayley, it hurts too much to be like Hayley. Hayley doesn't see that she is smarter than the men she desires. That the Spaniard is simple, unmoving. That she has colored his silence with her whimsical brush. And I don't need to have met him to be sure of this. Because Hayley has lent me her grandfather's book, and it is as evident to me as a Bougainvillea in spring that she's casted the Spaniard for the role of Teresa in the story of her life as Casanova. She's painted a rock red and convinced herself of its pulse. And like me, she loves as profusely as she imagines, which is to say that nothing of her love is wholly true.

Dear Hayley,

If my work ever finds you, you must know that I consider you the most profound reflection of my own heart. And as I begin to receive myself with tenderness, that pillow of warmth extends itself to you -- For your talent and your beauty and your willingness to fall. I write as an honest account of my thoughts at the time. But it is also true that my rejection of you came at the expense of myself. 'Kindness,' you once said. "Is the highest form of intelligence?" And being as you were, one after my own heart, I should have been kinder to you.

When you are black, you live forever cautious of the sun, it's darkening rise, its 'everywherity'. Light is beauty on the skin, in the heart, and Hayley understands this. She loves the fair contrast of her freckled skin against her hair, forested - a darkness which flows and extends with width and luring beauty, a darkness which descends. And she has taken a new name in memory of the spring. Josephine Jane Oeillet.

"Oeillet," she says, "is French for carnations". She'd bought some from a flower vendor after mistaking them for Jazmine, and no sooner was she amused by her capacity to hold this debate in French. The florist tells Hayley that his coronations are grown in India. That he is taken by this particular strand, "Oeillet Mignardise Blanc," he calls it - with the faintest touch of rose like the feathers of a flamingo coated with coconut powder. "I could only afford to buy two", said Hayley, fitting each stem into the nose of a wine bottle. "It makes sense," she says. "Oeillet, I just thought of that time we spoke about Pocahontas and my mother's Native American roots. You know how Columbus mistook the Americas for India, as naive as a vagabond might confuse a Jasmine for a wild Indian plant. And just the sound of it you know, Oeillet! I feel like it really encapsulates my love of traveling and my finding a home, here in Paris."

"Do you like it here Hayley? Do you consider this place a home?"

Coffee spews out the edges of Hayley's French press. It startles us both before she runs to its defense. "I bought this vintage coffee maker from this lovely vendeuse in Montmartre. She was so sweet you know. She told me it was old and a little broken but that it once belonged to her great grandmother, and though it was worn it meant a great deal to her. I told her I want it. Its good silver and I feel like objects really retain the sentiments of their owners you know." Coffee spills out of its edges and onto the tips of her fingers. "Argh, it's really quite problematic but I love it! I wouldn't change it for some shiny new French press, you know the glass ones from Ikea or something. The ones where you can just tell that should a person decide to move elsewhere for whatever reason, he'd probably discard it certain to find its likeness elsewhere again."

"I'm not very sentimental," I tell Hayley. "I get overwhelmed by the things I accumulate. I really enjoy throwing things away. I think that's why I started writing - it was kind of my way of holding on to things."

Hayley agrees that I'm more of a minimalist. That she saw it the day we first met. The simplicity of my dungarees. She says, "I could tell you had them for a while and that you'd kept them because they were useful, it wasn't something you'd just bought because they were cool. But I feel like I'm more of an eclectic person and you're more of a functionalist." I was beginning to feel aggravated by Hayley's constant need to compare and compartmentalize things. "Why should everything be a term for you? why do you have to label everything...sure I like to throw away stuff but that doesn't make me a minimalist, and even if it does that doesn't automatically make me a functionalist." I was both annoyed and in agreement with her. I've always felt weighed down by the things I've owned. More especially if they had no function. But it was the dichotomy of her argument which displeased me. Why couldn't I be both! "I do collect," I explained - I'd held on to each of my experiences, sewed them on my skin, in my posture. Experiences that served no function except to ache, except to weigh. "A person is not just one thing," I told Hayley. "You are trying to find a name that encapsulates all of you. You want to be able to, in one word, describe the entirety of your being. That's insane, Hayley and you can't do that!"

Hayley is tapping her foot on the floor, placing her hand above her scalp as though she is bored, as though she might leave me. And I picture myself stark naked in a studio, offering an old man a view of my body from behind. What would persuade a woman to let me stay, I wonder. What will I do if she casts me away?

"I know this is hard for you," Said Hayley, "but you are going to have to get used to calling me Josephine. I've been quite patient with you calling me Hayley, but it isn't the name I've chosen for myself and if you can't accept that then you're essentially not accepting me."

"No Hayley! You are not accepting yourself!" I'm about to continue, when Hayley starts to yawn. "Argh, I'm sorry," she says. "Maybe it's the wine but I'm feeling a little tired...mind if we reconvene some other time?"

Another time meant two weeks, maybe three, possibly two months in Hayley's timeline. Time she would use to travel to Beirut, or Germany, or Ireland from what I gathered. "Consider this," I tell Hayley before walking out her door. "I'm just about the only person in your life right now who calls you by your real name."

I arrive home to find my mother re-organizing her cups in the kitchen. She offers me a plate of food which I refuse, dunking my head in submission. She worries for a moment that I am seeing the old man again. "I had an early supper with Hayley," I invent, to which she sighs in relief.

Hayley has taken a nap and feels restored, elevated. "There is this petit fete tonight in the 5th, wanna come?" she writes, and though I roll my eyes, I am pleased to meet her. I arrive to find her wearing a pair of dungarees with one strap hanging off her shoulders and I see it as a budding sign of admiration from one wolf to another. "Awooooh!" I howl across the platform. "Awooooooh!" Hayley howls back. She is subdued by my willingness to play this part. She is a wolf, of this I can agree. She is more wolf than Jane, or Josephine, or Smith, She is more wolf than Pocahontas or eastern carnations. And she has written a poem in honor of her animus- The Wolf, she calls it. A long and unrelenting poem she reads until I fall asleep, then wakes me up mid-way through in order to explain its meaning.

I was in the end a good friend to Hayley Jane, I listened and I never complained. I say this to myself again and again while trying to withhold the urge to urinate. "This is the last train," says Hayley. "You got here just in time," when I began crossing my legs performing a strange dance on the platform. Hayley observes that I need to pee. She says if I could just wait five stops we'll be there. Just think about a desert, a drought, a marathon, of un-oiled skin, anything that might condition the body to retain its water. "I can't," I told Hayley, crossing my legs as if to pose or to perform an acrobatic stunt. A stream of stained water trickles down my leg and I cover my eyes to shield myself from her reaction. "I couldn't hold it." I stammer. "I'm sorry I've always had this problem, I just can't hold it." Hayley takes off her jumper and suggests that I wear it as a skirt. "The people we are about to meet are probably drunk by now, and Paris smells like piss anyway!" She laughs. We're both surprised when this works. "I can't believe I pissed myself in front of you," I mumble. "But that's what we do isn't it?" said Hayley, "We piss on each other."

I am beginning to feel a strange contradiction in Hayley's overall demeanor. While she exuded warmth and remarkable intelligence, she was also extremely delusional and hard to bear. More than strange, I felt very sad for her. Should her illusions shatter, which they most certainly would, she would be so deeply cognizant of it, which I imagined would hurt much more.

Chapter Fifteen - The Photographer



Auguste Rodin had a mistress. A plump and supple young woman - a sculptress. Enchanted by his genius she lay with him, she lived with him, she dreamed of becoming his wife. Camille Claudel was a student of art, a lover of Greco- Roman mythology, driven by the works of Donatello and Cellini. She was a welder of copper, bronze, and ore.

And the history of art would pay tribute. They would mention her tumultuous romance, and her gradual descent into madness. And as you walk past Rodin's *Thinker*, your thoughts on his lover, on Camille - on a woman carved out from stone, her hands bent over her head, her body curled towards the floor - *A Genius Interrupted*...you think, there is a storm in the quiet of this old Russian Residency, decorated with the works of Augustus Rodin.

You're seated by the window looking out towards the lawn. The photographer calls to tell you his daughter has been born. His wife is asleep exhausted from labour, and the joy in his voice is not for you, and it is not for her. You think of yourself when you think of his daughter. You think of your mother in the delivery room alone. Your father, too afraid to see his first born son. A year will pass before he musters the courage to see him. My father says he came because he'd seen my brother's photograph - the boy looked like him, it was his son.

My mother wonders why I've lost the color in my eyes. Why I hardly manage to finish a plate of soup. I tell her, "men are not brave, but they are supposed to be." She tells me men are ill prepared and they are frightened."

Grace is not to walk on water, but to sink without resistance. I let the dark of my thoughts become me. To have a child, I say, is exhausting, and he would run to me, he will fall asleep in my arms. I am nineteen years old but my logic is sound - he who fucks a child cannot raise one.

My father is only a few years older than the Photographer. I ask him hypothetically what he would do if I were seeing someone older. He tells me he doesn't understand why I would open myself up to that kind of manipulation. I want to tell him that it is me who is manipulative. It was me who threw off my clothes when the old men tried to leave me. It was me who lowered my voice each time I spoke so that he might draw himself closer in order to hear me.

My father says that being with an older man is like fooling a child into eating something he doesn't like by, for instance, pretending a spoon full of porridge is an airplane flying into its mouth. I tell him that the child knows it is not an airplane. Remind him that children love to play. That the child is getting you to play with her, when all you want is for the child to eat a plate of food.

I let weeks go by without saying a word to the Photographer. When I imagine my world without him, I feel my stomach turn and I'm unable to relax. When I call, he answers the phone hyperventilating, moving further from the sound of a woman's voice, from the splashing of water, from a child laughing. He's on the road now and the cars make it hard for me to hear him. I make out that it's been too long, that he misses me. That he has been on edge all the while that I've been gone. And I'm amazed by my capacity for silence, and its ability to dismantle a home.

The photographer has left his large antique camera in my home. It sits in the closet we once used as a dark room. The memory of his hands on my body overcome me. I shift the camera out of my room and ask the butler to help take it down. All this time I've had the old man's camera, he's neglected every opportunity he has had to take it back. So long as I have it, despite how long it took, he would always have a reason to come back to me. We silently agree that it will stay. But on this day I feel the urge to return it. I ordered a van to deliver it to his place. When we arrive he is the same old man - blue jeans, a cashmere waistcoat, a bald patch at the center of his head.

I am searching for his despair. I don't find it. He doesn't smile so much as he grins, his front tooth still has a brown lining around it...his beard unshaved...a beggar in a fancy waist coat. "Good bye," I say to the old man. "Goodbye," he says, sharing the weight of his camera with the driver of the van. I wait on the street as they mount a flight of stairs. I look at the old man, he doesn't look back.

Someone asked me once, "How do you know when you've been ruined?" She wanted to know because her father had died and she had since found it hard to love on equal ground. I told her no man will ever love her the way her father did. That nothing is as unconditional as a parents love. That she had suffered a great loss of infinite magnitude. That she would never be alright and she would have to find a way to be okay with that. I told her "trauma is an inconsolable wound you have not accepted to be inconsolable." I think the point is not to deny our wounds, but to assimilate them.

I looked for the old man in everyone. I searched hardest within myself. "Why do this?" he said, in response to my pleading. "Life is beautiful..." And I took that to mean he was, wherever that was, better off than here, in this city, with me.

Chapter Sixteen - India Oiellet

Adam & Eve.

The serpent cracked the mirror

Into a thousand pieces,

& the apple was his rock

-- Initium, Garcia Lorca

"I had a dream the other night. I'd left my art supplies on the top floor of the Basquet building, and I kept asking people to go up and get them for me. I even spoke to that boy you said 'looked like a cave-man' and he wouldn't help me. None of them would! It was strange, how frantic I was, running around begging people to go up for me - everyone refusing. I could have gone up and got them myself but I was afraid. I was terribly afraid." Says Hayley Jane, says Josephine Jane, says Josephine Oiellet, says India Josephine Oiellet. "What were you afraid of?" I ask all the women she has become. She begins to scratch her arms and fold as if to reposition herself in the warmth of her mother's womb. "I just didn't want to go up there - to the fourth floor of the Basquet building. As I went up the stairs I could feel my stomach contract, an awful dread. I think I was afraid to go to the fourth floor of my mind."

Pity, I thought, that one should leave their art supplies in such a place. My thoughts are shallow, mocking...it is my way of making the world more tolerable. Hayley too is caving into herself, scratching herself in nervousness, breaking out on areas of her back... I know this girl, I've been her. This inward state is dangerously contagious. I shift my weight to the rear end of the sofa, to the nearest point towards the door. "The body doesn't lie," I tell Hayley, "it bleeds and breaks, and it doesn't care what others think of you or how you refer to yourself. It knows you, it reveals you...You can't send someone up to collect yourself." And just as you begin to draw distance from Hayley Jane and all the women she has become, you realize you could not have said that to anyone else, not without a rolling eye or an exasperated sigh.

Hayley Jane, you learn, is afraid to go to the fourth of her mind. Afraid she'll come face to face with Hayley Smith who couldn't unfold herself from her brother's grip as he held her head down between her thighs - Hayley Smith who shrugged and screamed, who struggled to breathe as he drove. Hayley Smith who couldn't stop her mother from drinking. Hayley Smith who couldn't make her father rich, or ungentle, nor strong enough to reproach his willful wife. Hayley Smith who wouldn't let the food settle into her stomach, who chewed and swallowed then stuck a fork down her throat to throw it up. Hayley Smith, a daughter of darkness, a large and sinking stone, an unending shadow of self-doubt and insatiable appetite.

She wants to make her life into a beautiful story, a rising crescendo, an unending ride. She wants to make herself into a brave and mysterious creature, she hopes to die young or perhaps to live without ever aging. Hayley is convinced she can be whoever she wants, and she is convinced I know nothing of this because my house is large and planted in the heart sixteenth arrondissement.

Elias is the name of Hayley's Spaniard. He is no longer a fantasy, he is a real and tangible part of her life. He doesn't know that her new name is India. She likes that with him she can be Josephine Jane. And I too prefer Jane to India. Jane doesn't eat kale, or drink Columbian coffee from a broken French press, or spend her tuition on a collection of antique copper pots. Jane used to sit. Jane loved to lend me books. Jane could drink and host a range of eccentric coach surfers. With Jane there was laughter, with India there was mostly the unearthing of fossilized bones.

India sends me a long letter shaming me, calling me a reluctant friend. India believes she's offered me her friendship on a platter - considers herself a phoenix rising from the ashes. Thinks of my laughter as a sign of disapproval. She has recruited a band of abiding friends who will call her by her new name. Because, in her view, I've rejected her and turned to stone. But she has transformed herself despite this. Metamorphosed into something new. And she wants nothing to do with me or anyone else who knows her real name.

I want to pretend she's insane. But she is the same as we all are, and we judge her precisely because we are the same. I too want a new name so I change my email. I don't speak of the past in case it stains. I want to be seen as something rare and gentle. But I'm twenty-two years old and I've killed my first child. I know this girl. I've been her. She spent a whole summer contemplating my rejection. She wrote four letters or more - an ode to a mirror at odds with the image it reflects. The message she's sent (so long it leaps into to four pages) is a shortened version of what she originally wrote. She doesn't tell me this, and I hardly have it in me to respond. But I know where she is coming from. She is hurting, soaking up a page with propagated tears.

She is me.

She does not yet know that she is a writer so she's making her life into a story.

When I meet Hayley again, she has given herself to more men than she can count on. And she is exhausted from it all because she must invent a story for each one. The Spaniard, for instance. Enjoys the tight grip he feels as he tears the whole of her arse. She does not like this, but she will transform herself into what he wants as a symbol of her love.

Hayley tells me she's risen from a dark pit which nearly swallowed her. She seemed to be perpetually in a state of nearly drowning - of emerging from a desert storm transformed or rediscovered. But the state she's in right now seemed drastic even for India Oiellet. Hayley has me wait an hour at the station while she cleans up her place. I am annoyed at first, but I empathize. I wonder what it will take for her to see me as her equal. She tells me she's had a homeless man come over. That she picked him up from the road and had him shower and wash off his clothes. That she laid him down on silk covers and rode him with more force than the old horse given to us on our equestrian team. "I just needed someone to hold me," she says. And I am both repulsed and saddened. She's wearing a gown over black-laced pajamas. She reminds me that we once vowed to go to the theaters in the winter, wearing nothing but fur coats like Marilyn Monroe. She throws off her gown and asks me to photograph her squeezing her nipple out from under her lace. I comply, though something tells me she is broken. Hayley, like myself, could be wild but never vulgar. This is what becomes of a dreamer who is trying to be real.

Hayley tells me the neighbors are complaining about the noise she makes when she's writing her songs. I can imagine the irritation. India plays the ukulele, the most monotonous annoying sound. I ask her to play her songs over the keyboard, and I am moved to tears as she sings. They are not particularly good, but they are hers. They are so authentically hers. She has titled her album the Wolf, and transformed her poem into a song. She has written a song while I have remained unmoving - still as the roots in winter, still as a man who is sure he is right.

I tell her "perhaps all this time what I needed to do was lift you onto a high horse and to come down from mine." Hayley smiles and jumps to hug me, and succumb to my tears. "You aren't used to being hugged are you?" says Hayley. "No," I reply, "people either praise me or reject me." Hayley is about to play me another song when I tell her, "I'm not that strong you know, I'm not a threat, if you really knew me you would see that I am harmless."

Hayley laughs a heartily laugh, there is still a flame in her and I'm relieved to find it. She pulls out her phone and shows me the name that appears when I call: Cuddles Mittens. She says "I tell all my friends you're my cuddle mitten."

And I think, if you lessen yourself. If you succumb to your tears. You might meet the tender wheel of laughter, the simplicity of being, and the evidence of your equality.

I am looking for a place to lay my head. But the women are burning, and the men are made of steel. An Ayurveda practitioner feels my pulse, finds my element is both fire and wind. "You are a Pita!" he says, "but your elements are damped in water." He gives me a root to ingest to substitute the antipsychotics I've been prescribed. I tell him he is right, that for a time I was burning so I dunk my head into a body of water in order to cool myself down, to supplant my rage, as an offering to the ground which I destroyed. My mother says the wind blows the fire so that it spreads at the cost of everything. And I can't help but think that Hayley would have loved to see me this way - drowning a flame to keep it from burning.

Time has a way of revealing our enemies to be small. You've seen it in the men Hayley sinks towards. She is better off, and she doesn't know it, so they ride her oblivion down to its core where they are surprised to find a ravenous wolf, to find a woman willing to consume and destroy.

Chapter Seventeen -- Cinder

"Now I stand at the end of one life and on the threshold of another. Contemplating. Weighing. About me lie the ruins of life. Instead of blind faith, - directness, unbound energy; and instead of clearness, I have knowledge that comes with experience; work that is limitless in its scope and significance. Is not this enough to weigh against love?"

- Agnes Smedley, Daughter of The Earth

This is the point from which you heal. Your room emptied of the things you don't wear, you won't miss them, even the things that were rare. Slim your items down to your bare necessities. Pray in the morning, make tea for your mother. Speak to yourself in consideration, in kind. Remember you are young, but you are no longer a child. Picture yourself left with a bag full of clothes, climbing a mountain, being on your own.

You are simple. The life you want is simple. Learn to wash your shoes, try to rise before the sun. Do not fear a broken man, do not close your eyes to devastation. Do not go about life as if it were weightless, least not before you've embraced that you are black.

Black as a mamba, black as burnt bark, black as the men you fear in the dark. Do not fear what you are, there is still warmth in a body with scars. Be gentle, daughter of God, as you would with the residual spark from cinder.

In the distance, there is a mother nursing the wounds of her child. She is the image of what you must become to yourself.

You will roll your eyes upon hearing this, but there is something to be said about the artist and his predisposition to pain. There is something to be said of a mind that ignites; that causes one to leap beyond a reasonable point of excitement. That has one tidy up their closet and fold their underwear, and write extensive letters reporting, repenting. To know what a joy it is to be alive and to bare what follows.

The days which proceed will be dark and unrelenting. The heart is spent, it has dulled down with the hours. Till one finds no point in going on if going on means every day holding a knife to a vein.

They will want to curse this fight, call it a sickness. And reduce your name to the worst that you have done. But what exists in you is both the weight of the world and the capacity to lift it.

Last night my brother chopped two cylinders from a log of wood. He wanted to burn it, make a fire in our home - which was hauntingly cold with stone walls and glass windows. My mother remarked on the quality of the wood, said he shouldn't burn it, that he could sculpt it into something useful.

The wood was cut from a tree that sprouted when we were children. It grew just below our shoulders when my brother used it to measure his height. Now it towers the house and shades the sun-starved succulents. *How large our trees have grown, how we must be getting old.*

My brother peels off chunks of bark from his embryonic sculpture, throwing each piece into a pile of cinder. As he nears his nose to the plate of the woodblock, he finds it is fragranced; like earth, cinnamon and stone.

I draw towards the fire and inhale the scent of wood. The scent of incense burning on my bedside table, of my mother laying a cold cloth over my head -- the calm after forlorn screaming, the clumps of hair falling off the back of my head.

Last night I met with my father and he asked if I would marry one day. It is unlikely, I wanted to say, because I trust my recent history. He says he wants to buy a home In KwaZulu-Natal, to leave something for my brother and I. He asks that my brother consider the use of his last name, lest his children have no sense of where they're from.

And I feel for a time that I am sewn. I have a father and I am a part of his will. He remarks that I should not cut my hair again, reminds me of how long it once was. And I want to tell him that I know I am not beautiful, but I once was and I will be again.

I wear makeup on the day I met my father, I curse myself when I forget to spray perfume. I pray brevity will hide my scent as I hug my father. I hope he doesn't notice how marked I've become.

My father is eager to please us. He's made dinner reservations. He's ordered a bottle of red wine. He lowers his eyes as a contortionist folds herself between her legs, and I am taken by this gesture. I feel a scalpel blade uproot a rusted bullet lodged in my head, I feel it make waist of sore memories and revert shattered glass into sand.

My father asks the waiter to photograph him seated with his children. He asks again when I appear dark or solemn in each shot. The waiter activates the flash so as to discern my form from its shadow. But I fear each time I smile a sudden weight gathers under my eyes.

When it's time to leave my father asks that we stay a while longer. My brother is pleased and I am quietly relieved to be wanted. I think this is as near as I'll come to being as I was - to being warmed, to being welcomed, to being seen as something feared to be lost.

My father wants to know that we've arrived home safely. My mother wants to know what it was like to see our father. My brother falls asleep on the floor of his room. And I feel a sheet of steel wrap itself over my wounds.

Chapter Eighteen -- A Woman Alone Creating

*"All The Things she didn't want
She considered the lilies of the field."*

- Vita Sackville West , All Passion Spent

1

I find myself between the rice fields in Tegal Besar. I find myself evolved and in search of something solid. Each morning I break a leaf off of a stem and hold it in the palm of my hands. I pray before the sun scorches. I imagine the roots of a fever tree coil around my legs and into my body. I promise to be grounded. I promise always to be true to myself.

The truth is like a desert. It feels barren at first. You have to fast for forty days and forty nights, evade the devil's whispers. Folded, cold in the cave of my covers, I learn my capacity to bare my brother's pain would make it easier to cope with my own.

You give a local guide your camera. You never did care for the craft. It doesn't happen immediately, but gradually, you let go. You let go of The Red-Tailed Monkey, you let go of a broken man, you let go of a boy with skin like gold, you let go of the blood you've split over nothing. You hold on to your father, to his trying obligatory love. It is a gift to ache. It is alright to remember.

I am the soul mate of every man who has touched my body. It was a gift to receive you. From the front, from behind, from the death buried in my eyes. First came the men, then the madness. They occurred in that order. Made me a woman; made me an ark; made my burning body yield and craft.

I want a house on the cliff of a mountain. I want a wooden home with a flame to keep me warm. I want to live above stone, breathless from the slightness of altitude. I want to live alone, in abstinence - for the sake of my interiority; for my sanctity, for my tome. Let me write and fold, and leave the good earth to the frightened. Let them find the summary of my worth engraved on the stone above my corps, let them know that - *I had pain and poetry, I was something beautiful.*

