

/lit/ winners club
October 2025



4chan

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>>>/ic/6481312 (19123v3.png) by Anonymous

/wibac/

Writing Inspired by Art Challenge

October 2025

Entrants to this contest were tasked to write with inspiration taken from an image, shown left, over the span of three days, with a limitation of 3000 characters, the maximum length of a post on /lit/. The organiser of /wibac/ acted as judge. The winners are published here in ranked order from last to first, with *No.X* indicating the post on /lit/ if no title was provided. Two tied for third.

“Desperado”

WouldBird

Alan needed coin. Lenny wanted coin. The winds had not favored their ill-hatched scheme from the start. The teller tittered at their cloaks and hats, unimpressed by their axes and demands.

“Ain’t you just a regular pair of desperadoes?”

Lenny’s first swing split her necklace and Alan could still hear the wet gurgling suction of beads being inhaled.

“I look desperate to anyone else?” Lenny screamed, purple noose of feathers fluffing in and out.

The hummingbird nearly slipped in the gore, policing terrified customers while Alan ransacked the manager’s lock-box. The office hadn’t even been guarded and Alan was still wondering why, miles later, when their skinny shared mount catapulted them to the sun-fried dirt.

Fortunately, Alan’s arm broke most the impact.

It made dragging Lenny out from beneath the crippled steed difficult. Head bent like a nail, Lenny didn’t complain as Alan scavenged what he could from the corpse, tucked the container under his good arm, and marched.

Feathers drenched and talons bleeding, Alan carefully collapsed against an outcropping of rock that protected him from the sun. He only squawked hard enough to taste blood as his crooked limb jostled anyway.

Lenny had said the fence was a town over. Alan didn’t know how far away that was or what made one fence different from any back home.

“That’s what I like about you Alan. You’re too bovine for pesky details to get through your thick skull.”

Lenny had laughed when he said it, but somehow it didn’t feel like a joke.

“Who’s laughing now?” Alan said, swallowing the

canteen's last droplets of water.

As the sun set, he used the axe to chop open the coin-case. Inside were piles of dull gold coins.

His heart soared. He was rich! Just like them prospector fellas who'd swoop through towns and next he'd hear they were living in large cages, telling their stories with flocks of beautiful hens digging into their side.

Dopey smile on his beak, he figured that's what made Lenny's fence so special.

It'd make people want to hear his story. Shoot, he could even take them here. Right where he struck it rich. He'd just have to remember where this was. Luckily, Alan was able to scrape on the wall with a piece of gold, greenish black streaks proudly spelling out his name.

Alan shivered to sleep and woke to the sun's yolk spilling across his body.

Burying the axe in the ground as a final marker, he set off again.

He walked and walked and like a dream he stumbled into town.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Alan rasped to a wide-eyed mockingbird. "I'm looking for a fence."

She repeated the words back in a perfect copy of his voice and Alan hoped her laughter wasn't the last thing he heard as he faded away.

The doctor changed songs after Alan promised he could pay with gold, but his arm was beyond saving.

His new lady companion alighted on the other with a firm grip. "So handsome, what's your story?"

Head pillowed against her plumage, Alan felt like he was the luckiest bird alive.

————— No.24808071 —————

Anonymous

“So that’s one cheeseburger meal with our Halloween Frightful Fries. And for your dessert?”

“Just an apple, please.”

“We’re all out of apples.”

The words alone made his itch break out. He looked about the counter and rubbed his forearm, chasing the sensation all the way up until he had a finger jammed down the cuff of his work shirt and one fingernail scraping madly at his wrist. His mouth suddenly felt very dry.

“That can’t be? When I came in this morning you had a whole shelf of apples. You should have apples.”

“We have hot apple pie?”

“That won’t do at all.”

“Apple juice?”

“From-” his scratching finger dug deep into a fresh seam within his wrist flesh - like the two sides were being pulled apart. He knew his body was starting to fall off the bone. He began to sweat, visibly. “Is it from concentrate?”

The cashier took a carton from the fridge and checked the front, then the reverse of the label. The customer cradled his wrist and pinched the flesh back together whilst she went over the details of the nutritional information panel.

“Yep, afraid so, sir.”

“This is, uhh, bad news for me.”

“Maybe you can speak to the guy who just bought them all? I think you just missed him. Yeah, look, there he is.”

The cashier pointed behind the customer out towards the other side of the front window.

No.24815920

familyoftrees

Christians stay on the calendar for weeks. The old TV where their names were posted mounted high up in the corner of the trailer. Santo stepped in and unbuttoned a warm but old jean jacket, the door was always left open. He stepped over a floor littered with paper cups overflowing from the trash, placed his work boot crusted with cemetery dirt inside and crushed them down before it rose like a mass of decomposing dough yeasted brown. He leaned against the small desk with the orange light of the coffee pot still on and waited. The other grave diggers, men who worked the lot for decades, threw dirt, gambled at the track, drinking tequila in someone's apartment.

'Each person, just another 90 in cash that comes with getting out of bed' he thought. Santo filled a cup with coffee somehow both weak and bitter.

The TV screen refreshes and Santo crushes his cup, and throws it in the can. He would eat. Muhammed Al-Masri: 2:00 PM, he died sometime yesterday and Santo will now throw dirt. Santo ambled down the trailer steps into sunlight spreading across the piles of leaves, and equipment that was the backcorner lot. He opened the toolshed and pulled out a shovel shadowing before him into the great lawn. Santo lived off the Muslims, who were buried within 24 hours, and show up on screen like a wildcard.

'A fisher of men is what they called Jesus,' Santo never understood the phrase. Fishermen kill while Jesus saves. He dug the heel into his eye and rubbed deeply before cleaning the grounds.

He stood out of sight, down the hill behind a tree. The Mourners and the muslim preacher, wailed in a high tine,

foreign words. No words like that were spoken back in the high mountains of Mexico where his wife and kids lived. He wrapped the jean jacket over his face and fell asleep. When he awoke, it was night and foggy. He ambled up the hill and packed tight the open pit before resting against the newborn grave. They would come soon and he would be ready. After an hour, Fernando and Enrique walked up the hill, they worked the christian burials, Santo knew them by sight. They stopped several yards away, and smirked. Santo held his shovel up, not this one. He owed muslims something, he lived off them after all, and even in death their rings would stay on their fingers. The two groups stared shovels in hands. Enrique was tired of this old man, muslims had some great items. He stepped forward with a firm grip, stopped, the fog cleared behind Santo and he saw for a moment a great figure, wrapped in bandages grinning down from above. Enrique stepped back bumped Fernando and looked again, just a big oak tree. He shook his head and walked away. They buried 5 catholics earlier, old women. They would find what earrings they were wearing.

Santo watched them go and spit in their direction. Something bad would happen to them. He turned around and walked backwards facing the grave. He was hungry. He would take the bus to the beach and buy something to eat.

————— No.24812882 —————

Anonymous

A man, or what remains of him. Wrapped in linen and crowned with a horned skull. A mess of decay dressed in clothes of the past. Bewildered by the composition I ask *Why the apple? Is he able to eat? Does he even need to?* I notice the apple's irregular shape and its skin colored bottom. *The apple fused to his hand and ripped off his skin as he threw it? — This is nonsense, there's nothing here!*

I walk into the kitchen, and stare into the nothingness outside the window. The leaky faucet's hypnotic dripping dulls disappointment into calm melancholy. *Another week-end wasted I suppose.* I start to think of her, a habit of mine. Yesterday I was jealous of her other suitors that I had made up in my mind. But who am I to be territorial. There's no competing suitors, real or imaginary. Until I throw my hat into the ring there's no competition

This is stupid, why do I torture myself? I go for a walk, hoping for a distraction. The fall breeze blows my worries away as I look upon the sunlit rot of another year. The picture appears in my mind once more. *It's artificial, it's senseless. Decay as a vapid aesthetic and nothing more. — But why the ripped skin around the apple?*

I feel small as I walk beneath the bridge, I ponder the purpose of my writing. Above is the rumbling of cars speeding off to nowhere. I wonder why I even engage with these communities I detest. *There's nowhere else to turn. I am too self aware and scared to go elsewhere.* Realizing that anonymity is my shield to criticism I think of other ways I let fear control me. Red and yellow leaves blow past me, it's just me and the elements as I sink deeper into thought.

I think of her, again. *Why haven't I made my feelings known?* I use excuses to protect myself from the truth, I am

afraid. *It would be inappropriate to put a colleague in that situation, she's too young.* None of it matters I realize. *She tears me apart, I refuse to let go, leaving us to rot on the branch*

Returning from my walk I face the distasteful image on my screen. *I can't change it. But I'll make it my own.* Most things are outside of our control. All we can do is the best with what we have. I think of her. Maybe I'll tell her tomorrow, or some other day... Maybe that's enough for now.

/lwc/

/lit/ Writing Competition

October 2025

Entrants to this contest were required to incorporate theme and character elements. Entries were selected by popular vote, with each voter being asked to select a rank of three entries; first was disqualified because the author did not vote, but I have chosen to include it, leading to a rank of four. The winners are published here in order from last to first. Two tied for fourth.

The theme requirement:

If a tree falls in the woods and there's no one around to hear it, does it make a noise?

The character requirement:

A character must be a thief

No.24777519

WouldBird

A shiny captured his eye passing the book place. Cover winking at him through the window in words he did not know. Words and their letters had no use in putting food in his mouth or money in his pocket. It was sharp lines and loops and at the middle the shiny like a coin. He needed it.

Going inside, the bell alerted the clerk. "How may I be of service, sir." Last part said like swallowing a rotten worm.

He sounded like he read a lot. Feathers freshly preened. Owlsh eyes judging.

"How much?" he pointed.

Beak tilted upwards, rather than follow the finger. "Likely beyond your intellectual capabilities, sir. Our collection for hatchlings is rather low on stock, but should you prefer there is ample pornographic material which might better suit your predilections and literacy. Portraits only you see."

He knew some of those words. It was the same talk from noblemen's sons that'd come to the docks to point and laugh at his rags and jeer at the stink of fish guts in his feathers.

This one was no different, eyes getting bigger as Beck's hands wrapped around his throat. All them smarts going back to what was easiest to say with no air.

"Take it."

Leaving him sucking in breath and coughing, Beck grabbed his book. It felt like wooden handle of a gutting knife.

"Be forewarned, domino, you're on the brink of annihilation tangling with—"

The authorities found the librarian dead, the only item out of place a single book with the cover ripped off.

Leftovers

ineptia

I will not live long enough to know if what I did tonight will ever mean anything.

But the job is done and the bastard is never coming back.

Now for certain.

Tears of joy also streaked down my face when the abomination had died originally.

That day a phony sick email had let me stay home to laugh at the somber news reports like they were comedy specials.

Then at night I began bursting through the doors of the adversary's greiving online echo chambers to give "my condolences."

Basking in their despair I mocked the mockers on every platform I could access.

That is until I happened upon a peculiar group of supporters not sad in the slightest at their godhead's shuffling off.

And neither notions of "heaven" nor conspiracy theories had anything to do with their optimism.

This was because their solace stemmed from something both realer and wilder—the future.

They wrote things like:

"We'll meet again..."

"Quick! Somebody get the deep-freeze!"

"Given the current state of cryonics? Yeah we can expect a

thaw after a century easy.”

Initially I howled at their hogwash.

The enemy was deceased and would stay that way forever.

Although not “human” the foe was indeed mortal and had been conquered.

Right?

Or had I just been pissing on a dead snakeskin the whole evening while the true serpent was slithering away?

Eventually their ardent faith in the quackery of low-temperature preservation began to stop being so funny.

They shared potential timelines for the “grand restoration” and hypothesized over which cryonics company had been conscripted:

“So are we thinking Toporcorp or Geluheims?”

Crude theoretical blueprints were drawn up of machine bodies that could some year be used to recorporealize the ghoul.

Giving voice to their grim designs the moderator had started playing Daft Punk’s “BHFS” over the discourse which I now joined.

But the more I rebutted with facts or links or basic science the smuggler they became.

A line appropriated from George R. R. Martin served as their eternal refrain:

“Winter is coming.”

And who was I to say that it was not?

For who can truly tell how things will reveal themselves in the final analysis?

“Especially when you won’t be there to witness them—”

I said as I retched up my celebratory drinks at this all-too-real chance of wickedness’s return to power.

The knowledge that I would not be there if it ever happened did not give me comfort.

These internet fiends and I were gripped by what we could not perceive.

We were hearing the noise of a future-flung tree not falling down in its dark empy forest but slowly creaking back up to reconstitute itself.

After gazing at a grotesque meme of the evil-doer’s frozen visage the poem “Fire and Ice” by Robert Frost bit into my brain.

The world had barely survived the heat of the desecrator’s warm-blooded fury.

Yet here was the prospect “to perish twice.”

The planet would ultimately succumb as the damned-one’s second Cocytus.

No!

Not if I had anything to do about it.

But what could I do?

Damn it were any of these feelings real?!

I remember closing my eye for a long time.

“Just because you will not be there to witness tomorrow does not mean that it cannot be felt today...”

“And you can certainly change what tomorrow holds by adding or subtracting from today...”

“Clear the woods of malice and sow the soil with salt to ensure that there will be no ringing of any such adverse possibility.”

The names on my screen were cheering on this unlikely doomsday but I had even more resolve to cancel it completely.

A Saint George going after a dubious dragon egg.

In time the egg may or may not hatch but surely it shall not hatch if it is swiftly shattered.

I will yank away the sleeping snake and an armageddon I will never experience will be aborted.

I wiped away the misery-inflected water still in my eye and set to work determined to destroy the sinful remnant once and for all.

My objective was undefined and deep under the horizon.

So my first steps toward it would be assiduous research on the terrain I could actually see.

A “chiller” was what I called a proselytizer of the cryonics gambit and I listened closely to all of them.

The most astute were always from other countries on sites I had never known existed.

Users like InkCubator and gélida777 and 冰棒 were the best chillers.

Anything they said I worked into my spiderweb-stringed bulletin board.

More news trickled in every hour concerning the corpse of the one who ought to stay dead.

Despite every optics-related reason to have an open-casket funeral most chillers said there would not be one and they were right.

InkCubator wrote that his expired idol had probably spent less than three minutes at room temperature before being refrigerated.

So the perfunctory ambulance on that day would have been empty?

Then where did they bring the body?

Thus a map with multicolored tendrils of possible paths bloomed over a quadrant of my board.

Then as the villain’s brood cried on TV many chillers were quick to point out the signs of feigned anguish in their expressions.

冰棒 gleefully indicated that these were not lamenters but performers at the end of Act II.

The present-tense verbs they used to describe the maligner made my fists clench.

Persons of interest who stuck to past-tense verbs dropped off my radar.

The farce had been laid bare to me but I was still no closer to my goal.

Last morning I was reading a new post by gélida777 when I got a call from my supervisor at work.

Something about how my PTO had exhausted.

“Well if I’m not there tomorrow then fire me!”

And as I hung up I realized how I was exchanging my concrete life in the here and now for the slimmest odds of rescuing an abstract future.

A bonkers sci-fi future which might not even happen.

Who was more foolish?

The idiots who believe in pseudoscience?

Or the fool bent on deterring them?

Perhaps the creaking reconstitution I thought I heard earlier was actually just a further decay?

“And even if you know that the devil is indeed hibernating on this earth then what could you actually do about it?...”

“Mausoleums are more secure than strongholds...”

“Ice is harder to penetrate than water...”

“The eye may read the stars but the hand will never write them—”

And then my computer refreshed and gélida777’s writing disappeared.

It had been manually deleted but why?

I checked an off-site archive that retains everything and it was not there either.

I flipped back to the forum and gélida777’s post was back up again but it was a bit different than before.

A few words I had been reading a minute ago had been modified.

But I remembered them.

I brushed the surface of my bulletin board clear and wrote with marker onto the cork:

I FOUND A STATEMENT FROM SOME DECEASED OLIGARCH’S FAMILY BRAGGING ABOUT HOW HE’LL HAVE GREAT BUNKMATES IN CRYO.

PIC DELETED NOW BUT THEY SHARED A PHOTO OF THEIR FAMILY MEMBER’S POD.

GELUHIEMS CRYO PODS ARE ALL THE SAME SIZE BUT THE SHADOW OF THE ADJACENT POD TELLS ME THAT THIS ONE IS MUCH BIGGER.

WHO EVER THIS ULTRA V.I.P. IS THEY HAVE NOT YET BEEN JARRED OR TRANSPORTED.

I looked back at the altered text on screen:

I FOUND A FAKE STATEMENT FROM SOME DECEASED OLIGARCH'S FAMILY BRAGGING ABOUT HOW HE'LL HAVE GREAT BUNKMATES IN CRYO.

PHONY AI PIC DELETED NOW BUT IT SHOWED OFF THEIR FAMILY MEMBER'S POD.

GELUHIEMS CRYO PODS ARE ALL THE SAME SIZE SO YOU CAN TELL IT WAS AI BECAUSE THE ADJACENT POD SEEMED BIGGER.

HAPPY TO SEE WANNABES JEALOUS OF OUR V.I.P. WHO HAS ALREADY BEEN JARRED AND TRANSPORTED.

A sliver through the cracks.

This was my moment.

That night I drove to Geluhiems Cryonics.

I parked my car and climbed up an overlooking cell phone tower.

The telescopic lens of my Nikon COOLPIX P1000 magnified a truck being loaded under phosphorus lights.

Great shiny white shapes were elevatored up and rolled into its bowels.

Without a doubt they were cryo pods bound for the long term storage center.

I saw no police or guards.

Trailing far behind the slow moving juggernaut I was its only escort.

The 18 wheels would have to stop at least once before reaching their destination.

And they did at The Gassy Jack™.

I pulled in next door always keeping my eye on my quarry.

Nobody suspected me.

I pointed my flashlight at the back of the truck as I walked up the hill to overwhelm its cameras.

But the truck did not even have cameras outside or in.

I picked the lock and went inside and shivered as I made my way to the end of the snow-cold semi-trailer.

A larger-than-the-rest oblong apparatus stood before me.

I rubbed the frost from its glass like I brushed the documents off the board like a wiped the tears from my eye.

And I beheld the iced rictus of the beast.

After following the steps I had learned on the internet the container opened.

A head.

That was all there was.

No robo-body for you.

I scooped the skull from out its cage replacing it Indiana Jones-style with a Halloween-masked watermelon.

The button presses for opening were performed in reverse

for sealing.

I zipped back the way I came and the semi-trailer pooped me out.

With the head underneath an elbow I quickly replaced the lock and loped down the hill.

The victory hit me shortly after I made it onto the highway and I stopped on the shoulder to scream with glee at what I had just done.

Way more than 3 minutes had passed and my passenger side seat was already getting damp.

It was sodden with the liquid denial of apocalypse.

Soon I passed a farm and threw what had been defrosting into a pigsty as a midnight snack for the swine.

I burned my mask and gloves and flashlight and clothes and camera.

The bulletin board at home was already ash.

I always used writing as a lightning rod for my emotions but I am afraid I will have to burn you now too.

Not so chilly anymore.

The sun is coming up now.

I ought not be late for work.

Nunono

yodo

Nuno didn't know it, but he killed a man once. He knew he stabbed him, sure, felt the warm blood trickle over his scabby knuckles and run down his arm, but the man had pulled up his trousers and chased him out of the house alive enough.

Margarida was the name of the man's daughter and she was Nuno's first love. They'd met at school. She felt sorry for Nuno not being able to conjugate verbs. She sat directly behind him and would whisper the answers – her sweet breath made him so flustered he couldn't focus on anything let alone conjugating verbs.

They were very young, only in middle school, yet Nuno's love for her consumed all his thoughts—directed all his dreams. One night, Nuno had cried himself to sleep, tugging on his undescended testicles, thinking he'll never be able to have kids with her, not if his balls didn't drop.

After school, Margarida would take Nuno to Senhor Boca, the grocer who sold Jordan almonds in an open sack underneath the till. She'd get Nuno to go in there and act a fool, asking how much the penny sweets were or if they sold any tartan paint. Senhor Boca saw Nuno, smelt Nuno, his river-washed clothes scrubbed on a ridged cement board. His bad breath rinsed with clove water and his armpits powdered in baking soda. Trash, Senhor Boca'd say to himself, trash from the Formarigos, ciganos, he'd think, gypsy children born of gypsy parents, skid mark people, he'd say, under his breath, waiting to catch Nuno pocket something, even an olive, give him a chance, he'd think, any chance to beat on him.

All the while Margarida, with her plump cheeks like freshly baked rolls, her long lashes and dozy eyes, pilfering the almonds, filling up old socks to the brim.

The two of them'd go and suck the sugar off the almonds and then throw the nuts to the birds. When Nuno had to be home, Margarida cried and spat and twisted his arm skin till it was hot with red rash. He admired her passion but nothing compared to his mother's wrath, so he'd

have to leave anyway, in time for dinner.

Sometimes Margarida didn't come into school. And then when she did, she'd have a burn on her arm or her leg, from embers leaping out the fireplace, from scolding water splashing out the pan. Nuno didn't believe her. One afternoon, at lunch break, he said to her, my mum needs me back home straight away, sorry and because of that she didn't speak to him for the rest of the day.

Instead of going home, he followed her.

Followed her from school, across the trigo wheat fields, into town. She pretended to play in the street, hopscotching on the mosaic pavements, waiting outside cafes, picking leftovers—a crumb of pastry, the crust of a sandwich, a spoonful of frothed milk from the end of a galao. He watched her steal coins from loose pockets hung the back of chairs. She'd go spend the coins on a pastry and deposit the change back in the jacket, and if the jacket was gone, she'd flick the shrapnel into the fountain.

Even as the sun set and the streets emptied and the shadows grew longer and thicker, she ambled around the narrow streets, petting cats and peering into people's windows.

It was only when the temperature dropped, she resigned to her house. A cinder block house, bare brick and mortar, and a sheet metal roof.

Nuno fought the shivering cold as he watched from behind the quince bush, through the window, her father slumped on the sofa with a blanket pulled up to his chin, the orange glow of the fire on his face. He saw how, when Margarida entered, at the time she did, the man didn't stir. She just walked right past him. She didn't have a Ma. Nuno realised he didn't know Margarida at all.

Margarida hated the summer holidays. She thought it was a waste of time. She said, if there were no summer holidays then you could finish school by the time you were fourteen and then go and do whatever you wanted. She was called a nerd. A big head. A know it all. She was la-

belled lazy for wanting to read instead of helping pick strawberries.

When they broke up for the year, Nuno invited her round for dinner. She helped Nanda scale and gut the fish. She peeled the potatoes deftly with a paring knife against her thumb. When Kiko, in nothing but his undies, rode into the house on his little rusty bike, Margarida slapped him upside the head and told him to ride in the street.

Nanda joked they should get married already. Although Nanda saw her fingers and her nails – already they looked like hers, at such a young age, already the skin was hardened to life.

They ate fish mixed with eggs and potatoes and Margarida finished first and felt no shame in asking for seconds. Nanda asked about her parents, where did they work, where did she live, did they have any land?

Margarida said she didn't have parents.

Nanda said, "Oh so you live with your family, your Avos? Your tios?"

"No," Margarida said. "I live with the wolves."

Nanda told Nuno afterwards that she didn't like Margarida. That he was never to see her again. He couldn't trust a girl like that, Nanda said. She spoke with the knowledge of women only women have. Nanda imagined her ending up in the putas, smoking dope and selling herself. She wasn't mother material. She didn't have the warmth to keep her own home. She picked the bones of the fish with her fingertips and nibbled at the ends, sucking the juice from the inside. She asked Nanda, when she was leaving, if she could take the leftovers home.

The next day, Nanda made Nuno walk to Margarida's house and tell her he wasn't going to be able to play with her again. They'd see each other at school but that'd be it.

He knocked on the red metal door of the cinder block house. Margarida answered in her sleeping gown. She had bags under her eyes. Her father was asleep on the sofa.

"He's sick," she said, and let Nuno in. Flies buzzed. It was dark inside. The shades drawn against the afternoon heat.

"What's wrong with him?" Nuno asked.

"Drink," she said, flatly.

The word stirred her father. He drew himself up on his elbows.

"Carvalho, menina, shut the door." She shut the door. It was even darker now, they were all just figures, and Nuno twiddled his thumbs, standing on the welcome mat.

In the kitchen, she pulled a hanging thread and the naked bulb switched on. It fizzled and popped and the flies became busy about the electric light.

Her father clicked his fingers and Margarida dutifully got him the bottle from the counter. Her father sucked on the bottle and wiped his mouth as if he was drinking water. The drink gave him a different kind of life. He smiled and called Margarida to the sofa. Nuno didn't want to meet the man's eyes, the man's smile, mysteries oozing through the gaps in his teeth.

"Sit down," he said to her, "come on, bring your friend too, who's this then, why don't you introduce me to her?"

"Him," she said.

"Oh yes, I see, very good, come on."

Her father planted his hand on her thigh, her thigh so small his stubby fingers wrapped around the entire circumference.

Nuno stayed on the welcome mat. He had a reaching feeling in his stomach, it was the same feeling he'd get when he got lost in the woods, when he forgot to keep track, this sense of lostness, what was it, it wasn't so much he had nowhere to go, it was more that he could go anywhere, it was more that instead of one direction, there were an infinite amount of directions to go, and now, it was that feeling, that an infinite amount of things could happen, that he, the father, Margarida and Nuno, were stepping off a known path into forbidden terrain.

"My wife died, did you know what?" The father said to Nuno. Nuno shook his head.

"She's in a better place now, though, right. He squeezed Margarida's leg. It's just me and you now, isn't it? I'd be all alone without you, Margarida, wouldn't I?"

And he kissed her on the cheek.

"Stop," she said.

"What? I can't kiss my own daughter? My own flesh and blood? What are you embarrassed about? He doesn't mind, do you, your friend doesn't mind."

Nuno didn't say anything.

"See, he doesn't mind. He probably wants a kiss himself. Come here, you can give her a kiss If you want, look at those cheeks, she gets them from her Ma she does." He pinched her and she flinched.

"Stop it, Pa!" She got off the sofa and went to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Women," he said. Nuno started for Margarida's door but the father said, "Where you going? Come here and sit down."

And Nuno did. Margarida's body had made an indent into the plastic sofa covering which Nuno sat into. He felt how bony her behind was. How tightly her legs must have pressed together.

"Have some," the father said, and gave Nuno the bottle. Nuno took the bottle and sipped on the drink and it was like fire breath, the alcohol evaporated off his lips and tongue.

"Can I ask you something?" he said to Nuno. "You've probably been asked this before, tell me if you have, but I've been thinking about the answer – if a tree falls down in the woods, when there's no else around, does it really make a noise?"

Nuno hadn't heard of this question before. He thought to himself, why wouldn't it? He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think it does," the father said, staring into the fireless hearth.

Nuno's head throbbed with the alcohol. He felt stuck to the plastic.

"Make me a fire," the father said. "Make it nice."

Nuno made him a fire. His body moved independently from his mind. The 'I' of Nuno, what he called himself 'Me', floated not above but behind his body, just behind the head, watching the fingers strike the match, the newspaper crinkle and burn, watching and asking, what are you doing? Why are you here? Why don't you call out for Margarida right now?

Nuno and the father sat beside each other and watched the fire. The father drank and passed Nuno the bottle and Nuno only pretended to drink but still the alcohol got into him somehow. His body couldn't move, but the 'me' of Nuno was chattering, ready, fuelled by the adrenaline which ran laps of Nunos body. He let his eyes go blurry and he imagined the whole place going up in flames, he imagined himself jumping into the hearth and through the fire landing back in his own living room.

The father had removed the blanket from his lap. The whole time, he was naked underneath. Nuno only saw this when the father grabbed Nunos hand and placed it there. Nuno recoiled.

The father was slurry, "It's okay to do this," he said. "When there's no one else around." And he grabbed Nuno's wrist hard this time but Nuno was ready. Nunos 'me' the one who had stepped outside his body, the whole time remembered – his blade was sheathed on his belt at what would be 7 o'clock. The sheath was closed with a rivet button which for months he had practised undoing in a single flick, while tilting the sheath so as it opened, the blade fell easily into his hand. And easily it did fall, now, as he clutched the carved wooden handle and stabbed the father in the perineum. He leaped out from his seat as if sat on hot coals and clawed at Nuno but Nuno rushed for the door. The father slipped on his own blood. He picked up the bottle and threw it and it smashed on the wall be-

side the open door which Nuno disappeared through, never looking back. He never saw Margarida again.

The father doused the wound in alcohol and cauterised the wound with a poker made hell red in the embers of the hearth. He was too embarrassed to go to the doctor. Too afraid of the whispers and the gossip. The cauterised wound got infected and he suffered on the sofa for a week, the whole time calling out for Margarida's help, but she wasn't there. And when he died, he didn't make a noise, and even if he did, it wouldn't matter, because there was no one around to hear it.

Nanda was right about Margarida. She never became a mother. Never kept her own home. She ran away that night, after hearing the screams and seeing through the keyhole her father fumbling in the hot death dark. She climbed out of her window and ran and ran.

She became a Nun and she spent her whole life begging God to forgive Nuno for what he did to save her.

Nuno never told anyone what he did. Didn't boast. Even with his friends sharing stories of slashing policeman's tyres and mugging bankers in back alleys – Nuno never told anyone what he did. Instead, it lived with him. It solidified inside of him, a rough calcium around his bones. It sharpened his sense of direction. He wouldn't get lost like that again. He wouldn't be made a fool of.

He was a man with a knife who could cut you silent if you crossed him. A man with a knife who's name he now scorched into the wooden handle – the name Margarida.

Zangezur Mountains

Nomen

My mother tells me the first 5 minutes after you wake up is who you really are, but I always believed it was the first 5 minutes after you die.

“Heaven protect us Aram,” my mother, Mayrik whispers to me in response. Her Armenian accented English is thick as a slice of bread. She hands me the bible to start my day praying for my health and continues mumbling or cursing at me in a language I don’t really know. When she enters my room at first light, her palm always holds a circle of prayer beads, like withered fruit shrunk to pits. Four delicate fingers on the other hand wrap around a plastic cup of pills. The rim of the cup is frosted grey, maybe from frequent washing or harsh soap. I don’t really know, I’m not sure how most things happen anymore. I think she stole it from a pizzeria along with all the salt and pepper shakers in this small apartment. But how can she really blame me for feeling like that? I’m going to die soon. I sit all day, my last days, in this bed overlooking a field and forest near the freeway that the church pays for because of my diagnosis. My first five minutes awake are groggy like I’m swimming out of a dense fog and 1 glass of tap water. She starts asking me about my symptoms, lymph nodes, foot swelling and brain pain. I look out the window and make up answers based on the family of foxes I saw hanging out by the tree line last night, nipping at each other’s bushy tails and jumping around.

“Kind of black footed,” I reply. “My eyes feel dirty like two dry dens. About 4 or 5.” She nods along and marks up paper with a pen I’m pretty sure she stole from the hotel she sometimes cleans. I wonder about a lot of things. Maybe the last 5 minutes before waking up is who I really am. I would have liked to have finished 8th grade but:

“God had other plans,” Mayrik tells me. “Safe, safe I must keep you safe.” She’d cross herself and pull the black scarf around her shoulders tighter, looking around the sky for signs of rain.

“When can I see the doctor again?” I’d ask, drowsy after

my morning pills and bread, she'd respond in Armenian when she didn't want to answer directly and didn't want to lie, I guess she kept her promises to God. But I've been lying to her for the last 30 days and I finally have the strength to go die outside like how everyone else on earth but me gets to do. Bonus points if it's raining. I'd love to die soaking wet face up under the endless fall. She always pulled me out of school whenever it was going to rain. Claiming it was not safe. I was not safe. I spent a whole convergence zone locked in my room instead of taking my finals and I failed a grade so the admin thought I was retarded and put me on ADHD meds.

If I have one final wish it's just to be normal, and I can achieve that by joining the rest of the world out-fucking-side, even if it's death. I was always small due to the first 5 years after my birth. Americans here in the Chicago suburbs, so far outside the city it's not even really suburbs and cows graze the grass behind my middle school windows, all grew up eating animal fat and cookies. I wonder if they were eating French fries while Mayrik and I were living in our ragged tent on a rain-soaked Armenian hill that used to be part of a mountain that slid down into a valley and buried the town we lived in. I don't remember anything really, Mayrik said I drank nettle tea and chewed on something called tubers. Maybe chewing on pulpy things tasted like dirt, maybe I'm just imagining it. The idea of a village being covered by mud seems silly, as if things like that only happen in some far-off place nobody else ever heard of. I told some of the other boys in class about how the rain caused the mountain to collapse and somehow, we were the only survivors and lived on top of that mud and frankly that was a big mistake. They called me a liar and at recess, made me eat handfuls of dandelions. They tasted bitter, and gross, nothing like the sun color yellow. However, I didn't throw up or even get sick. Iron guts they called me, like I had a beep-boop submarine for a stomach. The boys admitted I really did grow up in a tattered tent on

the hill above where my father and family were buried. Before I got sick with cancer and had to stay home all the time, I would eat the school meal plan, pancake breakfasts with potato hash browns. I was still little skinny Aram, black haired, and skin the color of the nature documentary rhinos standing on the African plane swatting flies with their tails, but I was growing bigger.

Mayrik leaves my room, and I take the one pink pill I hid in my palm and add it to my collection under the pillow, thirty, a full thirty pills. They will give me strength. I just hope to God it's going to rain on my corpse. I've spent a year inside. I'm not getting better from the anti-cancer pills Mayrik gives me every morning. They make me nauseous. I must have been forgotten by my friends. I sit around weakly drawing or watching TV feeling even weaker while Mayrik goes off to fold clothes somewhere and sometimes comes back with a giant mop. I ask her where she's been and when I can see a doctor again and she responds in Armenian. Tonight, I am going to burst out of this window, jump down a floor and find somewhere to die out in a silvery wet field, like any other small thing that lived. People were not meant to die inside. The very idea is stupid, like cooking in a basement with no air or light and a concrete floor absorbing the smell of oil. That's just straight vile. Guess I'll look out the window until I die, or it gets dark. I squint and see the fox family again, hypnotic black feet slinking across grass frosted in the mornings and melting by afternoon then freezing again into rows of dirt by night. They play and melt back into the woods ringing the field. My father is under the mudslide on the other side of the world. Strange how a country would let that happen, a mudslide. I wonder if my father had his hands stretched out to try and reach me. If he was frozen in the mud all vertical, looking for the top where we camped in a ragged tent.

Mayrik showed me a scan of it once, my tumor, it looked like another eyeball behind my eyeball, dark and

dense. She said the parts of me will swell, and grow, the wrong parts of course like my legs from fluid retention while my arms turn brittle. I wish my friends could crack my skull open and scrape out the golf ball mass, stopping the glowing healthy cells swishing and circulating fluids and thoughts and dreams between the hemispheres but alas, we can't have it all, whatever.

I reach under my pillow and examine my pills, 30 pink tablets of amphetamine salt combo. I laugh because they think this late in the game, I still need these. For what? I write essays sometimes and send them off to school. But who grades them? Did I even pass? My point is that 30 full tablets should give me the burst I need to crawl somewhere special and perish on my own terms. I feel guilty for stealing my medication, it's not what Jesus would do as Mayrik tells me. But I am not really stealing, just taking it all at once later. I don't really have ADHD. I read a school pamphlet that the pills are supposed to make you feel calm, normal even, from regulating the nervous system. But my feet felt like exploding rockets when I took the meds, and I couldn't stop tapping them on the ground. I tried to explain to the school counselor, the distinguished Mr. Himothy Levels, that I don't have ADHD, but it didn't go well.

"Himothy?" I asked him, sitting in the office and squinting at his big face. "That's your name?"

"Is there a problem?" Himothy asked, folding his arms over a desk filled with angry red slashed papers. What I wouldn't give to be back at school. I tried showing Mayrik the pamphlet, but she tore it from my hands and ripped it up in hers. Muttering that she must:

"Keep me safe." And I've been taking all her pills ever since feeling sicker and sicker.

The day passed. I felt lethargic. I drew my father's hands digging up the village to the surface. I wanted to call the Armenian Church that sponsors us to chat with someone. Everyone else can talk to people when they

want, it's not fair. Mayrik came in with a tray holding more pills, knife, bread and a plastic cup full of Pepsi she had gotten from the church food bank. She set the tray down and we prayed in the old language. I knew the rhythm and the words but not what most of them meant. I palmed the knife and knocked the bible over. Mayrik fusses and fumbles about it, we both kiss the cover, and she mumbles something keeping me safe in several languages. Before heading downstairs for the night. I reach under the pillow and take out my stash of pink amphetamine pills; like tiny bird eggs. I washed them down with the remains of my flat Pepsi. It sticks like a lump of dried bread. A small blot of soda lands on my oversized white t-shirt. I think of sucking it clean for a moment then just take it off. The colder the better really for dying outside, I guess.

I rise from the bed feeling dizzy and crack the window. A slice of dark against the light of my room and put the knife in the back pocket of my basketball shorts. Goodbye all drawers, TV, bed, notebook and spiders. I land in the wet grass outside the window and feel buzzed-out, like thunder walking, a pot of water in my chest boiling with electricity. I am not used to moving much but I wobble-wobble my way across the grass, picking up pace. My blood feels alive. I start to run towards the distant trees, feet clomping over the cold mud frozen to little ridges breaking under my weight.

Maybe death is just like running slower and slower until I stop. I want to at least make it beyond the window where I was sick looking out. The thought of turning around and seeing the little light I left on disgusts me. Everyone else gets to run, kiss, slap somebody on the back too hard and then claim it was a joke, I can make it to the trees. The forest canopy is immense. The sound of a nearby freeway dampened. I stumble forward brush tearing at my legs and can't tell if I'm breathing or hyperventilating. I inhale and feel a budding warmth. It feels good. I trip and

land on my face. I stare into a circular hole in the side of a small hill felled with sticks and leaves. My elbows push off the cold ground, and I climb forward into it. I've lost so much weight I can squeeze through the entrance where it finally opens into a dry burrow. The fox den. I've made it to their home. I have just enough space to turn around and fold down on my stomach in the dirt. I face the entrance, a circle of light ringing the opening. This is perfect. A good place to die. It begins to rain outside, and the temperature drops but it's dry in here. I take the knife from my back pocket and press the tip against my temple. If I died in that bedroom, it would be like I was never even alive, nobody would notice except school records in a basement vault with no air or light. I called and asked the Armenian church once how much a burial cost, deepening my voice and we don't have that kind of money. At least the fox family can enjoy me, and my skull might be found in hundreds of years or even worshiped like an ancient god to these foxes. The knifepoint presses into my skin, where the tumor is supposed to be. Sharp pain, different from my insides. A warm trickle slides down my face. With the other hand I use 4 fingers to dig them down into the earth. I had a vision of a blood soup and let my temple drip into a little hole I scooped. The foxes will take care of the rest. They can eat me. They can nip at my face till sure I'm not going to harm them. I put the knife down and closed my eyes.

I awoke to grey skies near the entrance and several red fox faces staring in at me. "Hey little friends," I croaked. They yelped and backed away. I touched the zig zag cut over my temple with two fingers. It began to rain again, and I passed out. I crawled near the front and let the rain pelt my head. I was drooling and reopening the wound to drain my blood, but I kept failing to die. At one point, I think I ate some ferns and grasses, I chewed tree roots and mushrooms. Whatever I could grab without leaving the burrow. I dug the hole in the earth beneath my head even deeper. I lay face down, bleeding and drooling into the

ground. I felt myself lighten, like everything sick was draining out through a fever dream laced black. I remembered or hallucinated being a small child, standing in a warm spot eating a plum with the juice dribbling all over my face. A kind older man holding a knife, peeled layers of fruit away and held them out for me between thick thumb and forefinger, smiling when I grabbed with both hands. I think I'm dying.

I rose on the third day and exited. My legs were normal, headache gone, stomach fine. The foxes never ate me. I wiped my lips with my palm, My face, my whole body was encrusted with blood, dirt, spit, grass stuck to my dried fevered sweat. I stretched and little foxes danced and nipped at each other just beyond my reach. I held the knife up and walked out of the forest into the grass field, bare-foot and shirtless. I wrapped four fingers around the knife and held tight. This was the best I'd felt in years.

The Forgotten Chamber

Anonymous

He was drinking the tea.

Beyza, kneeling on the woven mat, watched without expression as he raised the clay cup to his lips, watched the working of his throat as he swallowed. Aruk's hand trembled slightly—the first visible sign—and she felt neither satisfaction nor revulsion. Only a peculiar emptiness, as though she observed a stranger performing a private ritual through the window of a foreign house.

The morning light came down in shafts through the smoke-hole above. The walls around them, painted with the old spirals and horned patterns, seemed to lean inward in the dimness. She could hear the muffled sounds of the city: footsteps on the roof above, a child crying three houses distant, the eternal rhythm of her neighbors' lives playing out in the honeycomb of adjoining rooms that made up their world. They had no streets here. Only rooftops and ladders, only the long horizontal sprawl of mud-brick and timber, house pressed to house like teeth in a jaw.

"It's good," Aruk said, and set the cup down carefully. His eyes met hers. "You've been different these last days."

She had been. Her performance was beginning to fray her nerves. She had leaned into him at night with her body, laughed at his small jokes, prepared his meals with a tenderness that was meticulous in its falseness. And yet—and this was the dissonance that troubled her, that made her wake in the dark hours before dawn—sometimes the tenderness did not feel false at all. Sometimes when he touched her face she felt such a profound recognition, as though he were completing some pattern in her that she had not known was incomplete.

She crushed these moments. They were the ghosts of a reality she had discovered was total fabrication. She had only to remember the map carved in old scars across his ribs, the chamber to which it led, and the body which she had found there. Her first husband. Dead, hidden, erased.

"Drink the rest," she said gently. "It will help your strength."

He obeyed. He always obeyed her now, the same devotion he had showed her before. He must have been obsessed with her. Obsessed enough to kill for her, obsessed enough to use the chamber's magic to beguile her. To steal her grief, the very truth of the world, and replace it with a love she had never chosen.

Aruk's face had gone pale. He set the cup down and his hand trembled again.

"Beyza," he said quietly. Just her name. Nothing more.

She did not look away.

The chamber had been his secret first.

She had discovered it three months ago, in the deep of night, when he lay beside her in fevered sleep. They were married then. Some illness had taken him—a real one, not her doing—and in his delirium he had cast off the thin blanket. She had risen to cover him again, and in the moonlight through the smoke-hole she had seen them: the scars across his ribs, pale against his darker skin. She had seen them before, of course, had felt them on the pads of her fingers, but this time she recognized a pattern.

She studied them while he slept. And during the day they would not leave her mind; they glimmered behind her eyelids with the insistence of prophecy. Then later, when he recovered, she asked him about them with careful lightness.

"Old marks," he had said, turning away. "From before."

But she knew the rooftops as well as the messengers did, as Aruk himself did. Two dawns later she copied them on a shard of pottery, fitted the shard against a rough sketch of the city, rotated, shifted, rotated again—until the lines settled over an unclaimed quadrant beneath the oldest quarter, an unassuming place, a gap in the teeth which had never been filled.

She had gone alone, in the dead hours when even the restless slept.

The chamber was small, hidden in the rubble of ancient collapse, its entrance disguised by fallen timbers and a

carefully arranged scatter of broken pottery. Inside, the walls were etched with symbols and strange designs that frightened her—figures with their arms raised, bulls with impossible horns, patterns that seemed to move in her lamplight. At the center, on a low stone bier, lay a body wrapped in faded indigo linen.

Her first husband's body.

She had known him instantly, though his flesh was sunken, his features collapsed. His rings, his amulet, the scar on his left hand where he had cut himself butchering a goat. All there. All real.

And with the sight of him, a heap of memories were suddenly unveiled. She remembered him. Remembered their marriage—cold and transactional, but never cruel. Remembered being his wife, living in his household, sleeping in his bed. Remembered the day he had vanished, and the grief that should have followed but somehow hadn't. Now recognized waking one morning and finding all thought of him simply... gone. Not only from her own mind but from the world itself, as though he had never existed—until she stood here, looking at his corpse, and suddenly he existed again.

But Aruk—when she tried to remember Aruk in those days, in the time before she had been married to him, there was nothing. A void. As though he had not existed at all until the moment her first husband had ceased to exist in her mind, and the moment her second had appeared before her, a chance encounter on a rooftop.

She understood then—felt it in her marrow—what power dwelled here. Whatever—or whoever—entered this circle slipped like a bead off the thread of the world, forgotten by every mind left outside.

Her first husband had been hidden so no one would mourn him, so she herself would not mourn him. And she—she had just stepped within the same boundary. Outside, in the vast hive of rooftops and hearth-smoke, her husband would now wake with a hole in his life where her

name had been.

Trembling, she backed toward the passage and climbed. Evening had hardened into full night; torches flickered on distant parapets. Aruk's silhouette—a dark stroke against the moonlit mud-brick—stood at the edge of the neighboring roof, looking about with puzzled vigilance. When she emerged he started, one hand on the leather pouch of his messenger's horn.

"Forgive me, mistress," he said, brow knitting. "You startled me. Are you... lost?"

No recognition, not the faintest spark. The chamber's law held true. From this moment forward he would remember her only as the stranger before him.

And yet her own memory of him remained, bright, conflicting, unbearably tender.

So this is how you did it, she thought. You killed one love to seize another, then trusted the darkness to clean the slate.

Very well. I will write the story over again, line by line. With a different ending.

She touched her forehead in a gesture of formal greeting. "My name is Beyza," she said softly, letting the words carry a tremor of shy warmth, that which she already knew he loved. "I couldn't sleep tonight. May I walk with you?"

Aruk's uncertainty melted into a courteous smile. "Of course."

She courted him as though for the first time, though her body remembered every preference and every hesitation, every word that made him smile. She brought him flatbread still warm from her oven. She asked his advice on a leak in her roof—he was a messenger, he knew the architecture of the city as his own body. She let her hand linger when passing him water. She laughed at observations she had heard before, in another life that only she remembered.

And he responded exactly as he had the first time, be-

cause for him it was the first time. Within days he was inventing excuses to pass her door. Within two weeks he had begun bringing her gifts from his routes—a string of blue beads, dried apricots from the southern quarter, a obsidian blade with an elk-bone handle. Within a month he had asked, with endearing nervousness, if she might consider him as a husband.

She made him wait. Made him prove himself. Made him ache with wanting her, because the ache would make the final revelation sharper.

The marriage was witnessed by the elders under the full moon. They moved their belongings into a single dwelling, merged their households, became in the eyes of the city what they had already been—though only she knew it. On their wedding night, when he touched her with trembling reverence, she felt her throat tighten with something that she quickly stifled.

The months of their renewed marriage were easy in their rhythms. Aruk was gentle, devoted, transparently in love with her. He told her the gossip of the rooftops, the small dramas of their neighbors. He brought her wildflowers that grew in the cracks of the old walls. He held her at night as though she might dissolve if he loosened his grip.

And she—she played the role of contented wife with such conviction that sometimes she lost track of where the performance ended and her true self began. Sometimes, waking before dawn with his arm across her waist, she would feel a happiness so complete it frightened her. She would lie very still and catalogue the warmth of him, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the particular weight of his body beside hers, and think: This is real. This matters.

Then she would remember.

She would remember the body in the chamber. The rings on withered fingers. The careful map of scars that had led her to the truth. She would remember that everything she felt—this tenderness, this bone-deep recog-

nition, this sense of having found her other half—was built on murder and violation. That Aruk had killed to possess her, had used forbidden magic to make her forget, had trapped her in a love she had never chosen.

Or had she chosen it? Her restored memories of her first marriage were clear enough: comfortable, respectful, even warm. Her first husband had been a good man, a fair man. They had shared meals and conversation and a bed. It had been a good marriage by any measure. Surely these feelings she had for Aruk—this terrible, consuming tenderness—were simply her body's memory of marital love, confused and displaced onto the wrong man. Surely that was all.

Still, the dissonance gnawed at her. Late at night, after Aruk had fallen asleep, she would trace the scars on his ribs and try to reconcile the monster who had committed murder with the man who wept when she was ill, who sang to her while grinding grain, who looked at her as though she were the axis around which his world turned.

She could not reconcile them. So she stopped trying.

She reminded herself instead that she was the only person in the world who knew the truth. Her first husband had been erased so completely that even his own family no longer remembered him. The chamber's magic had rewritten not just memory but reality itself, or near enough that the distinction ceased to matter.

Only Beyza carried the truth. Only Beyza stood outside the lie. The weight of it was dizzying, intoxicating. She was the sole keeper of what was real.

And if sometimes that truth felt slippery, if sometimes she found herself doubting her own memories, wondering if perhaps she had misunderstood, perhaps the body was someone else, perhaps—

No. She had seen the rings. She had seen the scar. And the magic of the chamber was absolute, it had to be him, since it was memories of him that had been returned to her.

There was another body she remembered with perfect

clarity, though that memory too had been... adjusted.

She had been seven when her brother Davut fell. They were playing on the rooftops as children did, leaping the gaps between houses. She dared him to jump a span that was too wide. Taunted him when he hesitated, called him baby, called him afraid. She watched him gather his courage and leap, then watched him fall short. His tumble through the smoke-hole of the abandoned house below, the scream suddenly cut short, would never leave her.

When she climbed down to him, his neck was broken.

She had knelt there for a long time, understanding with cold clarity that she had killed him. The guilt was a physical weight, crushing her chest, stopping her breath.

And then something had... shifted.

By the time she climbed back up to call for help, she had convinced herself. He had jumped on his own—reckless, always reckless, never listening. She had tried to stop him, had called out, had reached for him. The new memory was so vivid she could feel the phantom sensation of her fingers brushing his tunic as he leapt beyond her grasp.

When the adults came, when they asked what happened, she told them her truth with perfect conviction. And they had believed her. Her mother had held her and wept and said, "It's not your fault, my heart. You tried to save him."

And Beyza had learned: truth was only what you could make others believe. And later that night, when the nightmares came, she learned again: but memory was not negotiable.

Now, lying beside Aruk as he slept his poisoned sleep, she felt no guilt at all. He had rewritten her memory; she would rewrite his death. It was only justice. It was only fair.

The poison had been simple to acquire—a merchant in the eastern quarter who asked no questions. A powder derived from certain seeds, slow-acting, mimicking wasting illness. She had been adding it to his morning tea for two

weeks now, just a pinch dissolved in honey. He had begun to weaken, to complain of pains in his gut, of exhaustion that sleep could not cure.

She nursed him with flawless devotion. Held the cup to his lips when his hands shook. Bathed his forehead when fever took him and whispered comfort when he woke confused in the night.

"I don't understand it," he had said yesterday, his face grey as old ash. "I've never been sick like this."

"These things come," she had murmured, smoothing his hair. "The body is a mystery. But I'll take care of you. Always."

"I know." His hand had found hers, squeezed weakly. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

Now, as he grew too weak to manage the ladders, as his breath grew shallow and his pulse thready, she made her suggestion.

"There's a place," she said softly, kneeling beside his mat. "A quiet place I discovered. Away from the smoke and the noise. You could rest there properly. Recover your strength in peace."

He looked at her with such affection it should have moved her. "I can barely walk."

"I'll help you. I know a route, an easy one. We'll go slowly, rest as often as you need. Please, Aruk. Let me do this for you."

His eyes, sunken now in his thinning face, searched hers. Then he nodded.

The journey took the better part of a day. She supported his weight, guided each footfall, whispered encouragement when he faltered. The autumn sun climbed and fell. Around them the city breathed and shifted—voices calling across rooftops, children racing past, the smell of baking bread and curing hides and the dense, living musk of eight thousand souls pressed into their comb of mud and timber.

Aruk leaned on her heavily, his breathing labored. Several times they had to stop while he retched, bringing up

nothing but bile. Each time she held him, stroked his back, waited with patient tenderness.

"Not far now," she told him. "Just a little farther, my love."

When they finally reached the collapsed shrine, when she guided him down through the hidden entrance into the painted chamber, he collapsed immediately onto the floor beside the stone bier. His skin was the color of tallow, sheened with cold sweat. But his eyes, when they found hers, were still clear. Still full of love.

"Beyza," he whispered. A cough wracked him.

She knelt beside him, her heart beating very fast. This was the moment. She would tell him what he had done. Watch understanding dawn on his dying face and let him know that she had always known, that every kiss had been a lie, that his precious love had been built on sand. She knew. She had always known.

They crossed the threshold of the chamber. She opened her mouth to speak.

Then she remembered.

She remembered Aruk as a boy of eight, gap-toothed and laughing, teaching her to leap the rooftops. Aruk at twelve, solemn-faced, listening as she confessed through tears what she had done to Davut, how she had changed the story to survive, and saying only, "It's our secret now."

Aruk at sixteen, kissing her for the first time on the roof of the great oven while the stars wheeled overhead.

Aruk at twenty, holding her while she wept because her family had arranged her marriage to a wealthy merchant, a good match, a secure future. "It's for the best," he had said, though his eyes were dark with pain.

She remembered the years of her marriage—comfortable, empty, a hollow shell she had walked through like a ghost. Her husband had been kind enough, had never raised his hand, had given her a good home. And she had hated every moment of it with a hatred that burned so cleanly she could taste metal.

She remembered coming to his window two years into the marriage, her face desperate. "We'll go to the northern settlements, start over. I don't care if we have nothing."

And she remembered his words: "Your family would be shamed. They'd never forgive you." A pause.

Then, her reply, quieter: "Unless he were gone."

She had been the one to say it first. Had planted the seed and watched it take root in Aruk's horrified eyes. Had returned to it again and again over the following weeks until his resistance crumbled. Had obtained the poison herself—the same poison, she realized now with dizzy irony, that coursed through his veins at this very moment. Had held her husband's head in her lap as he died, had whispered comfort, had felt nothing but relief.

And then the guilt had come, not immediately, but slowly, like water seeping through clay. The weight of what she had done, the enormity of it, had begun to crush her. She could not rewrite this memory as she had rewritten Davut's death. She had been too old, the crime too deliberate, the truth too sharp.

It had been Aruk who hid the body.

"The old messengers say if you place something inside, the world forgets it," he had whispered, holding her while she shook. "Not just forgets—it's as though it never was. And then you'd be free."

"But what about you?" she had asked. "If you carry him in, I'll forget you too. The moment you step inside—"

"I know." His arms had tightened around her. "But I'll come back out. And I'll make you love me again. I've done it once."

She had tried to argue, but he had been adamant. "Let this be my secret. Let me be forgotten for a while. It's worth it."

So they had done it. He had carried her husband's body into the chamber in the dead of night, and the moment he crossed the threshold she had forgotten him completely. Had forgotten their childhood, their promises, but also

their crime. Had woken the next morning alone in her house, a widow with no memory of how her husband had died, only a vague sense that he had... left. Gone somewhere. The details slipped away like leaves in the wind.

And Aruk had carved the map into his ribs so he would never forget where the chamber was, would never lose his way back to the truth. Then he had courted her again, patient and devoted, had won her heart as though for the first time. And it had been real—gods, it had been so real, more real than anything in her life, because it was untainted by guilt, uncomplicated by the weight of what she had done.

They had been happy. They had been so terribly happy. Until three months ago.

The restored memory of her husband's existence had not included the memory of his death, or of Aruk before, because Aruk was not in the chamber with her at the time. The chamber had given her just enough truth to damn them both. Then robbed her of the rest.

The memories kept coming, merciless, complete. She saw herself administering the poison, saw the tenderness with which she had done it, her first husband's face. Aruk's face.

She had killed the only person she had ever truly loved.

"Beyza." His voice was barely a whisper. She looked down at him through tears. His face was grey, his lips blue, but his eyes were clear. "You remember now."

"Yes." The word broke on a sob.

"Good." A faint smile touched his lips. "I wanted—wanted you to know. For so long. It was so lonely, remembering how we were by myself."

"Aruk, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't remember, I thought—"

His hand, cold and trembling, found hers. He coughed, a wet, rattling sound. "My fault."

"No. No, this is—I did this, I've always done this, I killed Davut and I couldn't bear it so I made it his fault, and I

killed my husband and I couldn't bear it so I made it yours, and now I've killed you and I—" She was sobbing now, unable to breathe, unable to think past the enormity of what she had done.

"Beyza. Listen." He squeezed her hand with what little strength remained. "You have to leave. Right now."

"What? No, I can't—"

"You have to." His eyes held hers, urgent. "If you leave me here, the world will forget. You'll forget. You'll be free again."

"I don't want to forget you!" The words were torn from her. "I can't, I can't lose you again—"

"But if you stay... I know you, Beyza. Promise me you won't take me out."

"I deserve it." She bent over him, pressing her forehead to his. "I deserve to remember. I deserve to feel this."

"No." His hand moved weakly to her face, his thumb brushing her cheek. "Love is sweetest in the beginning. Three times I've loved you, three times I've won your heart. What man could ask for more?" His breath was coming in shallow gasps now. "Let me do this last thing. Let me give you peace."

"Aruk—"

"Please." His eyes were dimming, his grip loosening. "Promise me."

"I can't." But even as she said it, she felt the terrible pull of it. Erase the pain. Rewrite the story. Survive.

"Promise me." A long, shuddering breath. His hand slipped from her face. His chest rose once more, fell, and did not rise again.

She knelt there for a long time, holding his hand, feeling it grow cold. Around her the painted walls seemed to pulse in the lamplight. Bulls with impossible horns. Figures with raised arms.

She thought of staying. Of sitting here until she died of thirst or hunger or grief. Of letting the chamber hold them both forever.

Then she stood slowly. Her legs were numb, her whole body shaking. She looked down at Aruk's face, peaceful now in death, and tried to memorize it. Tried to hold onto this moment, the knowledge of who she had been and what she had done, though she knew it was futile. The chamber would not allow it.

She bent and kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I love you. I'll always love you."

Then she turned and walked toward the passage.

With each step, she felt the chamber's magic beginning to take hold. By the time she reached the entrance, Aruk's name was already slipping away. By the time she climbed up into the evening air, she could no longer remember his face.

She stood on the rooftop as the last light faded from the sky. Around her, the city breathed—smoke rising from a thousand holes, voices calling, the smell of cooking fires and human life. She felt hollow. Not empty, but hollow, as though something essential had been carved out of her, leaving only the shell.

She knew she had been somewhere. Done something. Something important. Something that mattered more than anything else in her life.

But she could not remember what.

There was a man, she thought. There had been a man. She had loved him. Or hated him. Or both. The feeling remained—a vast, aching tenderness shot through with horror—but the object of it was gone. She grasped for details and found nothing. Just the feeling, enormous and untethered, floating in the void where memory should have been.

She touched her face and found it wet. She had been crying. Why had she been crying?

She didn't know.

She stood there as darkness fell, as stars emerged one by one in the vast sky. She stood there as the city settled into sleep, as fires were banked and voices quieted. She

stood there alone, feeling the absence of something she could not name, mourning a loss she could not remember.

The wind picked up, cold and dry, carrying the smell of distant rain. Beyza stood on the rooftop and stared at the horizon, waiting for something she could not name, searching for something she had already lost. Soon the feeling would pass.

The chamber had done its work. She was free.

the end

