

/lit/ winners club
August 2025



4chan

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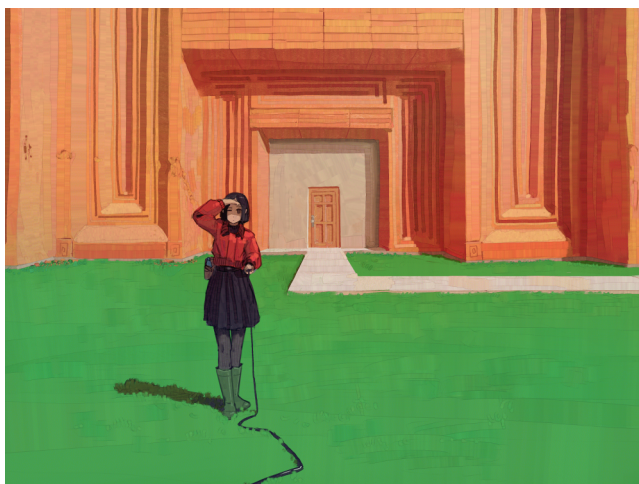
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>>>/ic/7656943 by Anonymous

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Writing Inspired by Art Challenge

August 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/. Three judges were selected from former winners and runner-ups of /lwc/. The winners are published here in ranked order from last to first, with *No.X* indicating the post on /lit/.

penisino

La herbo estas screen-green, like someone turnis hue to 110%.

La orange facadeo stackas door-in-door.

Mi standas in red jaketo, boots stickas, holdas la kordo—
black snake-cable with heartbeat, trailas shadow across la
lawn.

Mi pressas la plugo to my ear. Dialtono: bees playas organ.

“Ĉu vi hearas?” mi askas la building.

Ĝi answeras by not movi: la shadow ne slidas, though suno
walkas. Time kneelas.

Mi tugas la kordo one notch.

La far door shrinkas, then growas, like breathing.

Another tug; a clicko under ribs: hallway unrollas, floor wax
and oranges.

Mi tasteas chalko; a bell ringas but ne arrivas anywhere.

La columns lookas like organ pipes, filing teeth.

“Nomu min,” la facadeo whisperas.

“Gate,” mi sayas. Too small. “Monolito.” Too museum.

Ĝi hum-laughas, ne agreas, still openas a centimeter more.

Another tug. Birds flattenas into parentheses.

La walkway chalk-lineas into a staffo.

Mi onklo, dead por five years, waveas from la third door, lac-
kas one ear, still hearas me.

“Hold tight, ne tro,” li mouthas.

Mi plantas heel deeper en la lawn.

La kordo warmas—blood-warm—and beginas telli secrets:

“urbokoro... loopo... mi scivolas pri your bones...”

Mi tellas it: mi once hidis under a piano during a fight and
learnis how wood breatheas.

La building leanas por listeni. Sun flakas landas on my
tongue.

Mi testas brake: twist-knot, fisherman quick.

La kordo shiveras, then settlas like a leash to no dog.
Mi feelas la city reroutas—buses stutteras, coffee frothas getas
a second, someone missas a bad idea by just enough.
Ne demandas what mi doas; mi still learnas la verbo:
Pullas? Dialas? Milkas la afternoon?
La grammar refusas siti. Let ĝi runas ferala.
En la centermost doorway, a room flickeras: kuirejo small as a
throat.
A woman singas mezzo voce to a single chair; la note crackas
once and healas twice.
La kordo thrumas like ĝi estas jealous.
Mi could stepas forward—past la lawn, past la orange throat—
but mia sleeve catchas on a nail of sunlight, and mi stayas
stitched to outside.
Mi liftas la plugo. “Dankon,” mi tellas whatever anima vivas
behind la facadeo.
“Ne dankon,” ĝi returnas, which meanas “again soon.”
La shadow rememberas movi; birds re-inflatas into commas.

Night finally dropas like a hoodie hood, and la monolito
coolas.
Ĝi tryas a last warning—audit-growl, badge-tone—but mi un-
pluggis, and la law canas not grab a song.
Reportso: minimal complaints; one guy wantis faster dark;
li endis deliveri folding chairs.
La teen sendas al mi an mp3 that smellas like oranges and
hallway chalk.
Mi stashas it en pocket near matches; light devas have sib-
lings.
Morgaŭ? More hour-hacks: gardeners needas gentler glare,
kissers needas shade, a janitor havas stardust stuck en mop.
Mi staros again en la civic-green, at la lip of la god-amp, la
kordo snakas like a risky idea,
and mi pulos not brave but razore-careful,
because la suno stretchas best when a whole urbo gripas one
edge and refusas let-go.

Hart Glass

On the sunny Aegean coast stood the Iliophagos Temple, facing the sunrise, low and wide, as if engorged. Aoi felt the hard Mediterranean light just like all those years ago.

Back then, she'd moped for days about being dragged along on her parents' business trip. By the end, she was moping about having to go back to glum, chilly Sapporo. That also quieted down after a while.

She'd splashed and stumbled helplessly at first, to a chorus of laughter from the local brats. But things came fast at that age. Soon she'd found that swimming and football really did beat beetle collecting and Nintendo, and the kids, though big and tanned dark, weren't so scary after all. Dimitris had handed her a jagged rock, then blushed and scampered off. She still had it. She didn't know why.

"My babas says don't go near that temple," Eleni had told her. "It's from before Hristos. It's bad." Petros laughed.

She remembered how its shadow was big and long, how it seemed to dance on its own.

Aoi hadn't kept in touch. Writing in English was a pain, and she'd figured that three little Greek island kids wouldn't be going to good schools or doing anything important with their lives anyway. She had been right about two of them. After she'd left, Dimitris hit the books. "I'm going to be a great engineer," he told the other kids in English just to impress, hiding the Japanese textbook he'd begged his yiayia for under his math book. When asked about it, he just blushed.

Not that Aoi would find out.

The summer before Lykio, Dimitris was mopey. He was getting older and nothing was changing. It was Petros who suggested going to explore the temple. "Impress your chink girlfriend," Petros said. Dimitris didn't have the heart to say she hadn't written.

The three went in the middle of the day, the sun blaring. "The temple is from before Hristos," Eleni said, holding back tears. Dimitris just shook his head, tired of telling the others that there had been no Hristos. Then Petros laughed and opened the door, and the three fell at once into deep darkness, where tiny devils cut off their toes, plucked out their eyes, ate their hearts.

Aoi hadn't expected to meet her old friends on this college trip: this was only a backpacking stop, after all, and after those nights in Bologna with a man she'd met on the train, she found she barely remembered Dimitris' face anyway. Still, she was sad to find nobody responded to their names. The craggy beaches from so long ago felt lonely, she had to admit.

While digging through her backpack for condoms, she'd found that jagged rock and remembered the temple. Why not pay a visit? Sure, the villagers shook their heads at the name, but this was a superstitious country. She was sure she'd meet Keiko later in Lyon and laugh about it.

She had supplies and a rope too. It would be fine.

She took a second in the sun.

From before Hristos, huh? She liked wine and butter, but the West could keep him.

Then, clutching the rope, she opened the door.

No.24641734

Dhammazedì

The Blush Temple stood behind the derelict movie lot in downtown Porto. All agreed it was ‘*estranha*’—strange. It was three years old, having been erected by an army of quasi-enslaved North Africans for the production of “*Tempesta: Lady of Pain*,” a two-hour shlock that bombed and ultimately busted the studio’s entire fantasy division, and whose plot was universally panned as both incomprehensible and clichè.

The entire lot had been abandoned following the film’s failing, and the North Africans had occupied the property for a time, demanding an additional Euro a day. Following their deportation, The Blush Temple was soon discovered by three adventurous scamps from the local Roma encampment, whose daily investigations unearthed fallen costumes, scripts, and even a single clapperboard. In delight, the children smoked cigarettes while they recited lines from “*Tempesta*” in mocking voices, and clacked the clapperboards mouth open and closed, calling “scene!” and “cut!” and “action!”

In time, the three Roma children—Vee, Plenti, and Casper—performed the script with such regularity that they came to achieve a familiarity with the brief and shallow world of “*Tempesta*” that eclipsed outside reality in both vividness and importance, leading them, after a single year of recitations, to endeavour toward the real thing, the ‘*performa maxima*’, in which the entire world would be their stage. The children walked home that evening in full costume, sharing a cigarette and holding hands, bobbing up and down beneath the blood red setting sun, each wearing ex-

pressions of absolute conviction upon their precocious olive faces.

Vee, who played Tempesta herself, practised her lines outside the trailer while Plenti and Casper, who played the nefarious Omdo twins, beat Vee's parents to death with bats and bricks. Now appropriately orphaned, Vee began her 'accumulation arc', in which she discovered her latent power of turning 'pain-to-strength' and encountering a band of wholesome outlaws (whose actors she found drunk but complaint at a local bar). In this way, the children charted the hero's journey for the span of a brief, boiling Porto afternoon, before confronting one another beneath the Blush Temple at sunset, where Vee, initially outmatched and deeply wounded, stuck herself full of pins, and harnessed the resulting 'pain-to-strength' to overwhelm and annihilate the Omdo twins, before ultimately succumbing herself.

Their bodies were found the next day. A headline ran: "Gypsy Rigamarole: Feral Children Reenact Boorish Schlockfest." The resulting press attention saw "Tempesta: Lady of Pain" renter its theatrical run, turn a massive profit, and gain a cult following.

Few remember the children's name; those that do exalt them as the last true thespians to walk the earth.

/lwc/
/lit/ Writing Competition
August 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. The winners are published here in ranked order from last to first.

The theme requirement:
Must explore how location can affect psychology

The character requirement:
A character must be possessed by lyricism

Contagion Thanatos

Yodo

Late, is the clashing of bass amongst the peoples of old Thanet. Late, is the humming drumming totally encompassing noise of rattled strings and beaten drum skin and vocal chords torn for the drop. Noise, it's what keeps this Isle afloat, this Isle of Thanet, a *Skerry Thanatos*, with her puss and mud sodden banks jutting westerly into the South Bight, England looming.

In this little seaside town, nestled in a nipple of land shoring the North Sea, it's true, on a Friday night, Jan Pawliki, lead singer of Semen Demon, will spit on your face as he chin-dives into the crowd; and then, on a Saturday morning, Jan Pawliki, Head Barista at Cliffside coffee, will serve you up a delicious flat white for 8.99. He'll hold out the card reader using his hand tattooed with the anatomy of the vulva and arrows pointing to the parts named Labia Minora, Labia Majora, vaginal opening, urethra and BINGO!

There are many more like Jan. Once you've swam in the wonted streams of Thanet's specific vibrational quality, it's almost impossible to leave. *Almost*, I say, because *I* managed to. Sort of. Following the fixed ranks of Ursa Major, I escaped on a skiff and drifted out to sea. Although, I did not get very far. I am now stuck atop the measureless deep a few miles out from the white cliffs, floating, anchored by the sound, by the music so lurchy and gnarled.

It's called Entrainment, what tethers people here. Frequency locking. When bodies, brainwaves and beats synchronise, blurring the liquid in your ears. On the street it's called Contagion Thanatos and it's why I should have listened to the warnings, why I should never have ventured onto the ten square mile chunk of chalk and chaff in search of gain, overdrive or otherwise. I was charmed, I admit, I yielded to her song.

They say the chalk bedrock is made of the bones of those trapped and buried there. They say the isle itself once ne'er existed, that it began with a man condemned, cast adrift on a skiff not so dissimilar to mine, with noth-

ing but his lyre and Orpheus as inspiration. Mainlanders used this punishment, so the story goes, so many times that the exiled all gathered and tied their boats together with locks of their rocky hair and raged with sound until they boiled the shallows, until their hulls heaved heavy-metal and all that was left, when the dust and foam cleared, were their skeletal remains pecked clean by gulls; and the broken strings; the treated spruce and mahogany of the instruments' curved bodies; all of it bound together in a lithified monument to those who chose not the mortal existence of simple muzak but the harried symphonies of melody's possession. Then, for years after, aspiring Byron's and undiscovered Reed's, poets and musicians from the unclar coast of the Southern Bight, sailed there to die and live forever. Their bones piled up to make the cliffs and fill out the land, their instruments and wooden canoes fused and grew into the forking hawthorns and sycamore avenues which, even today, if you can find the aux-port hidden in the bark, you can plug in and listen to the ancients' song.

But I have escaped the worst of Thanet's thrashing, finally, and on my skiff I drift, yet, though my sail catches wind I remain in the offing, the white cliffs of bone always the same distance away. First I suspected my inertia a mirage but mark this; I will not be complacent. Acoustic propagation travels with ease on the sonic ducts encompassing the isle. This phenomenon is common around the eastern mouth of the Strait of Dover all the way up to the Broad Fourteens. It must be the reason I cannot fully untether from the Isle of Thanet, why I am stuck in this forever-almost.

Out here, surrounded by the bleeding longitudes of shallow sea, life is not so bad. I have made friends with seagulls and seals. I eat sardines and horse mackerel. I catch them easy with chunks of callous from my palm and fingers. And I try my darnedest to avoid rhythm and musicality. This has precipitated not a few disagreements with

the seagulls, who often catch a tune or two, but so shrill is their barking it does not much affect me. Seals on the other hand are great friends. They burp and fart and slap and it's all beautiful in it's own way, yes, nature scores a fine ambience, but lyrical it is not. Seals honk in a register outside of even the most alien scale system. I love them. They bat their eye lids at me and flare their nostrils when they get close. Sometimes they cuddle up with me under my Aran blankets and together we watch the stars which decorate the sky with such even spread. But I sleep in sweats because, as you know; Late, is the life of a Thanetonian. Music and verse stirs the inky air and fashions with odd dimensions undulating waves which lap and quarrel against my waterline strakes. This lapping to me is comprehensible. For example, this creeping wave-fizzy in a tritone—I recognise. It's a droning track from *Vermes Faecium*. The coprophilic lead singer, Gavin The Gimp, I hear his gurgling scream in the salty brine splashing overboard. Gavin, poor Gavin, once a photographer, a family photographer, with an electric-white studio where he would happily snap the bare feet families who would sprawl out in fun and casual positions. Now, Gavin is the Gimp, a psycho-spiritual hierophant officiating submission with a root and fifth. They were always a bit too much for me. I draw the line at scat, both fecal and jazz.

As the moon ascends into the 4th house I hear a siren's call. I am not imagining it. It is not an illusion because my bunkmate, the seal, now too cranes his fat neck to catch the sound within his little ear holes. Louder now, more shrill, and the seal and I for a second curse the gulls for their midnight crooning, but no, it is not a gull. It is a tune. It seeks my ears, seeks to catch the beat of my heart, seeks the sinewy tapping-ligaments of my foot—so I stuff my ears with pocket lint. I hold tight the soft body of my friend the seal and hope for a night filled with his honking snore. I pull the covers over me and wait for morning, for the quieting affect of early rays.

Hard on each other's heels, my nightmares tread the steep road of sleep. No place was there for silent calm, no peace did avail; the mute fell prey to dulcet tones and all were made to sing the tale.

I wake. The seal is gone, slutting. Peach kissed clouds spread out across the near, blueing sky. These are Eliot's skies, euthanised; these are Turner's skies, brushed in broad strokes. I'm struck with mornings hunger not for food but for quiet paintings, for monotonous sport (like tennis or golf).

"Yo, ho, out to sea, to breaking waves, my soul and me! You can tear me asunder, yes, oh, god of thunder and waves, think of this mere flesh, and best me in battle with your—"

"Shut up!" I shout, shouting into the air. I'm going crazy, finally, my mind is singing to me...

"Sorry!" I hear.

"Who's there?"

"Here!"

I see a hand, reaching up the side of my skiff. I see a vagina on the hand. It's Jan.

"Fucking hell, help me then!" says Jan.

"You mustn't sing or rhyme or anything like that."

"Alright, I'm sorry, I'm trying but I heard you mumbling something wonderful." Jan treads water. His mohawk is wet and flaccid.

"Mumbling?"

"Hard on each other's heels, my nightmares tread the steep road of sleep..."

"Shut up!"

"My bad."

So, I speak in my sleep. That explains a lot.

"Promise me you'll be monotone."

"Just let me up for fucks sake."

I heave Jan aboard. His black jeans squelch as he finds his seat. He is topless but you wouldn't know from afar, so covered is he in tattoos.

“Take this.” I hand him clumps of lint. “Press it into your ears. It helps.”

“Thanks,” he says. “And thanks for letting me up, too. Fuck, my brain hurts. I’ve been head-banging for the last two weeks, non-stop. I couldn’t fucking stop, not if I wanted to, I could feel my brain leaking out my ears, I swear to god, so I just fucking ran, right into the waves. We getting away from here or what? Why we just sitting like plums? Don’t this thing move? Let’s go! Let’s go France or something, fuck this place. D’they got music in France? Probably. Shit music though, all French I bet. Let’s go then, on the boats, if fucking four year olds from Albania can do it, so can we. What you waiting for?”

“We’re stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“Yes, the Contag-

“Contagion Thanatos. Fuck! It’s still got it’s hold all the way out here?”

“Somehow, yes.”

“Have you tried paddling? What’s this sail made of, underwear? This can’t carry nothing-” Jan fingers the sail. He stands up. “We can try paddling or something. One arm each. That should do it. Just to get a little further away.”

“I’ve tried everything,” I say. I hand him a fresh sardine. “Eat something, for your strength.”

Jan takes the sardine and bites into the head like a chocolate bar. He crunches loudly and passes me back the rest. “Thanks. Save that for later.”

“You must get used to this life, out here, surrounded by the bleeding longitudes of shallow sea-”

“Oi, don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t start waxing poetic. Poetry is the music of language. It still counts.”

“I was just talking...”

“No one talks like that.”

“I do.”

"Well, you're still infected with the *Contagion* then, aren't you? No wonder we're not moving."

"Don't joke with me, Jan. This is my boat."

Jan adorns his hips with his veinful hands. "I didn't peg you as a *Semen Demon*?"

"I'm not. I like coffee, that's all."

"Oh. Right. So you're one of the poets then? Coffee and crying. Where'd you live? In the caves?"

"Yes, smugglers cove, off Joss Bay."

"Fucking poets. What would we do without you? Imagine, fifteen minute solos, just shredding until the strings melted."

"Let's not talk about it."

"Right, yeah, sorry, mate...You lot have it the worst, is what I think. Even a shit gig is better than one of your fucking reading nights. Don't get me wrong, I love a good line, but fuck me aren't you lot weird."

"Yes. Why do you think I'm here?"

"I see." Jan sits back down. He takes his ponytail tight from the scalp in both hands and pulls up, draining water from his green hair. "I used to be a doctor, you know?" Jan says. "A neurologist at Kent and Canterbury. I should never have fucking left. But this chick, fuck me, if you could see her, you'd write a sonnet or two. She played bass, of course, she was great with her fingers, if you catch my drift."

"Ha," I chuckle without realising.

"You like that, yeah?"

"Oh, no, sorry."

"What?" Jan prods my knee. "You cheeky bastard, you're here for a girl too aren't you?"

"Yes, well, no. Yes and no. In fact, yes and yes. I came for a girl and left for a girl. So I'm here for myself, not for a girl, because I initially went for a girl—"

"You writing another poem or something? Spit it out mate. We ain't got all year."

"Actually, I think we do."

"Listen, back on the isle, I heard some slam-poets jabber on about...I won't repeat it because it rhymed, but they were saying how to get away, to cure yourself of the *contagion thanatos*. You got to clear your mind - you got to rid yourself of anything fanciful or metaphorical, you need to get white noise in your mind. You can't be lyrical or rhythmic."

"I know that."

"But do you though? You gotta be bland in your mind. In your minds eye—"

"That's a metaphor."

"—fine, in your head, your head voice. You gotta be just nothing, like a statue or something—"

"That's a simile which is a kind of metaphor."

"Fuck me!"

"I assume you don't mean that literally, and in that case, you are again speaking somewhat metaphorically."

"Maybe I'll just be quiet then."

"Maybe you should..."

Jan throws his leg up onto the bench. His boots remind me of tar-pit mammoths. I pray his chatter remain ceased, fettered by our bond on this boat. Jan then swings his hand at me, backslapping my shoulder.

"Oi, stop it."

"Stop what?"

"I can hear you. It's coming out your ears, *fettered by our bond on this boat*. You're thinking in poet speak. Jesus fucking Christ you really are far gone, aren't you? How long you been on Thanet? Maybe there's no hope for you but let me help you, let me try at least. Tell me, what's your name? What did you do before you got infected?"

"I..." Never before have I been lost for words. I...I...think back into my past, to the days of reading Manilius, who taught me how to light the sky, to the days of John Donne, his words, they're like music, they scratch my torrid itch—

"No!" Jan kicks me. He's standing up now. "Stay with me, now. What were you? Let me see those hands, yes, you

got big hands, these are working man's hands! Look at that callous! Like rhino skin, what were you? Don't make that face, okay, yes okay sorry for saying rhino skin but that's peanuts compared to the verse in your head!"

"Peanuts is a metaphor, in that context."

"That's right, yes, simile bad. Rhyming bad. Everything poetic bad! Listen, can you hear me? What did you used to be? A carpenter maybe? Wait, I know, fuck, it's obvious, you were a sailor weren't you, or a fisherman maybe, yes, that's it, why else would you have a skiff like this? Try and remember, silence the mind, let your mind go calm like the...like the nothing, like nothing, just let your mind go calm."

"Okay, okay. I'm calm."

"Great, now, just think of nothing. Look, look at the horizon. Feel how nothing it is." He turns his back to me and points. On his back there is tattooed a large faded circle, which, yes, now I notice is a target, like on a dartboard. A smile sneaks into my lips, O muses, you are my guide, how could one pass up such delicious poetic irony? I lift my leg and kick Jan, bullseye. He grunts and then plops into the water.

"Oi!" Jan screeches. He tries to reach up with his hand again but I stamp hard wherever he pops up. "Let me up!"

I'm afraid to think what I have done. Look on it again, I dare not.

"Help!"

Jan struggles to tread water with his swollen fingers.

"Shut up, Jan," I say, turning my back. "p-Lease, do Not give Up the ghost so Loud!"

With the iambic pentameter, Jan tires, struggling, spluttering.

A little water clears us of this deed.

Soon, he drowns in a fit of bubbles.

The greatest of bards with utterance inspired have sang of such deathly things, have vanquished many with the force of their verse, and conquests proudly won. Many a

musician have in darkness lay and called upon the devil to play riffs and chords so pleasing, but be that as it may...

I lay back on my skiff and pull the blankets close to me. I find Jan's headless sardine and throw it to my seal friend who waits patiently at the stern.

Hard on each other's heels, my nightmares tread the steep road of sleep. No place was there for silent calm, no peace did avail; the mute fell prey to dulcet tones and all were made to sing the tale.

Killing Time in Kansai

Son of Hermes

My friend, Océane, assumed I was travelling to Japan as a sex tourist. A ridiculous notion, I pointed out, since I'd lost interest in women years ago. "But," said she, "an anonymous lay in an exotic land is so... romantic! You might just find your muse, Ben."

"You and I have very different ideas of romance," I replied. Japan was attractive to me for its landscapes, its culture, and to scratch the long-buried, adolescent itch of weeabooism. Temples, neon, mountains, mascots. In other words, the kinds of contrast that have driven occidentals like me to obsession since Commodore Perry. As it turned out, I discovered that this confluence of ancient tradition and modern amenity to be absolutely ubiquitous and (after only a brief adjustment) completely mundane. For instance, it was easy, even quite unselfconsciously, for me to buy a squeezebag of ice cream from a vending machine at Kinkaku-ji. This state of affairs had no impact on my appreciation for the place, mind you. I had not come as a spiritual seeker, as seeking so often leads to expecting, and again these contrasts were *exactly* what I had expected. All I wanted was a change of scene, and to see what there was to be seen.

That being said, the one immediate and abiding shock for me was how the cities were constructed. I landed at Kansai International, and the train to Osaka offered architectural views that I was only able to describe as benign-metastasis. A strange, spontaneous profoundism. "How's that for contrast?" I nearly wondered aloud. Hadn't this place been firebombed to hell in the war? How could any society, in the span of only eight decades, build for themselves homes that looked like giant, random outgrowths from the millennial strata of Troy? Another profoundism. "We Japanese, very orderly," said Uta, the matron of the small hotel where I booked my stay. This was a polite way of scolding me for being 30-minutes late for check-in. Indeed, I guessed they have to be, their living arrangements being otherwise so jumbled-up.

Language was another factor. I had probably fewer than 1000 words of Japanese, and many of these were for food items. The basic pleasantries were more than enough for most touristic purposes, however, since Japanese is a highly contextual language. “Daijoubu” alone seemed to mean eight or nine different things when said in different situations and different intonations, and I managed to nail each meaning pretty quickly just by paying attention to locals. Jumbled-up, but efficient once I got the hang of it. My main source of embarrassment linguistically was a propensity to respond in French, «Pardon, quoi?» when I hadn’t quite understood something said in Japanese. This confusion reached further heights when a Frenchman asked if he could take a chair from my cafe table. I replied, innocently trying to use as much Japanese as possible, “Hai, douzo!”

Exhausted but nonetheless thoroughly amused by all this, I decided to make a daytrip to a small onsen town in the mountains. “A good soak alone can cure much disease,” was the phrase I began turning around in my head. A good soak *alone*, by oneself or by itself. Cure much *disease*, especially if the advertisements and folk wisdom about mineral baths were to be believed. A good soak alone can *cure* much dis-ease, i.e., preserve it. I was more besieged by this wordplay than I was self-satisfied, and couldn’t stop it from coming to mind for the whole bus-ride and later cable-car to town. At the top of the cable station was a designated smoking area, and instantly I felt the need for nicotine before finding my bathhouse.

There, I sparked up conversation with an Italian tour-guide (a Japanese woman who gave tours in Italian), and she said this was the only public smoking area in the whole town. “Here,” she added, “we (smokers) are considered worse than terrorists.” I’d already noticed elsewhere in Japan the fact that public smoking was banned everywhere outside of designated areas and certain cafes. This, despite the enduring popularity of smoking in Japan.

I supposed that these bans were more heavily imposed in “scenic” locales, like this little town, and unlike the illicit smoking I’d seen outside of nightclubs. Still, the largest fine warned about was a measly 1000 yen. Too much to want to pay for every smoke break, but too little to be a real deterrent. I told the tour-guide that it must be more to do with a social desire to follow the rules, rather than the actual penalty. “Ah, so you have us figured, yes?” she smiled and extinguished her butt in the provided can.

Arriving at the onsen, which I had been careful to research as tattoo-friendly, I purchased my ticket at the vending machine in the entrance. Then, I took my ticket to the front-desk attendant a mere three steps away, who then exchanged my ticket for towels and an exfoliating pad. “Man side,” he said, pointing to his right. I was surprised the place was gender-segregated, since each bath was private. Lacking the words to talk sexual politics with him, I just gave a quick bow and “*arigatou gozaimasu*,” omitting the final “u” of “*masu*,” as was seemingly the standard among all but the very elderly or the especially polite. That, and when it worked to include it in the meter of a song. “Final u,” I thought. Release from Samsara. Then, I nearly broke the squat stool at the pre-bath shower, being a lardass foreigner. Once I found my balance, I rubbed myself raw with the pad I was given, except for my ankles which continued to flake and flake no matter how much I went at them.

“Fuck it,” I eventually resolved, and made my way to the murky brown water of the hotspring. The temperature was cooler than I expected, maybe slightly milder than my experiences of jacuzzis. The smell, however, was an unbelievable mix of blood and sulfur. Rich in iron, I had read, but the sulfur hadn’t come up. I was put in mind of the Sengoku Jidai, imagining that my bathwater had been the site of some great dynastic struggle, before realizing that I knew very little of that history and was hamming it up just because this was, after all, Japan. I landed instead on

thinking of it as “hot Austerlitz,” which had me cackling, even as I had to hold my nose to endure the smell. This must have caused some disturbance, as the attendant knocked on the doorframe and yelled “Kudasai! Stop, please!” Still plugging my nose, I let out a nasally “Gomenesai,” and thereby struggled even harder against my own laughter.

Before heading back to Osaka, I texted Océane about how I kept finding ways to amuse and embarrass myself in Japan. I got a reply shortly after I was getting dinner in Dotonbori: “So it’s not sex tourism, it’s masturbation?” I nearly choked on my skewer of kushikatsu. “Shit,” I thought, and really began to reflect on where I was. Dotonbori is not *the* red light district of Osaka, since prostitutes of varying degrees advertised openly just about everywhere in the urban core, but it is *the* hub of the overall nightlife. Was I depriving myself of an essential tourist experience by not buying an hour (maybe only half an hour) with a hooker? Sure, at home I was happily sexless, but why travel across the world to do what one does at home?

I finished my deep-fried, sauce-drenched, on-a-stick meal feeling lightly overstuffed, but nonetheless willing to test my virtue. Just a short walk across the canal I found catgirls, maid girls, maid catgirls and so on, replete with offers of “massaji? massaji?” The costumes did very little to inspire me, but it was dawning on me that I liked the idea of these girls being so available. I kept walking and walking, getting more and more of these offers, but still not springing for it. Was it cowardice, I wondered, conscience, or simply that I didn’t change just because my surroundings had? Finally, I arrived at a massage parlour: YUFUKU. “No, you fuck me!” I joked to myself before realizing that this place was, in fact, for foot massages rather than sex. Like many tourists in Japan, I’d been walking between 20-30km per day, and the idea of a foot massage sounded like heaven. So, instead of paying 30000 yen to fuck a 20-some-

thing Japanese girl, I paid just 5500 yen to let a 60-ish Chinese lady absolutely muscle my feet to oblivion. Quite a bargain, I thought! “Your ankles filthy,” she told me.

I took further daytrips, and I kept reaching for profundisms and wordplay where knowledge and experience failed me. All of these were meaningless, and not worth recording. I made my way to Kyoto, where I had the aforementioned squeezebag of icecream at Kinkaku-ji (forgive this extended parenthetical, dear reader, but Kinkaku-ji is not so very ancient. The current temple is on its second or third iteration {depending on how you count}, having most recently been destroyed in the 1950s by some retarded monk. For a literary adaptation of this event, you can read Yukio Mishima’s *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion*). I went also to Nara, where I was smart to arrive in the early morning. By the time I arrived at the main attractions of the deer park and adjacent Todai-ji, there were maybe only 50 other tourists. As I was leaving, literally thousands were just arriving. Early birds and worms. I hiked Yoshinoyama, a famous cherry-blossom-viewing site, home to many sacred sites and (of course) vending machines almost the entire way up its three peaks.

I was woefully under-prepared for that hike. I thought that it would be a pleasant, if steep, stroll. It started out that way, and even though it wasn’t sakura season the views were stunning. I felt very lucky to be able to take it all in. As the climb got harder, my mind turned back to profundisms and my thinking became distinctly metaphysical. “Atman and Brahman are one, and that can be true even if Sam Altman thinks it’s true,” for one, “time is a recreation of the universe in each moment,” for another. More difficult still, things became about pure survival. I was never in any danger, in retrospect, but to complete the hike I believe that I had to *believe* that I was. The views became unimportant, and the shrines were mere objects, and all that mattered were the peaks and the legs to carry me to them. I was passed by the same couple of Japanese wo-

men several times, as they were stopping at shrines more frequently and their pace was far brisker than mine. I heard one of them call me “Amerikajin,” and though she was incorrect I accepted her insult, as it was intended, *in stride*.

Through all of these trips, I kept the room at Uta’s hotel in Osaka as a sort-of home-base. I ran into her frequently, usually doing aerobics on the sidewalk in front of the building. Despite my initial sin of arriving late for check-in, she was warm towards me and even hugged me several times. I understood that people in Osaka are a lot more laid-back than people in Tokyo (rather, I had been told this), but such intimacy from a Japanese septuagenarian struck me as being well outside of the norm. On the night I returned from Yoshino, she was in the lobby. “Ben-san! You, karaoke! Come!” I tried to protest, especially as I was reeking from the hike, but she proved quite insistent. So, we went together to the karaoke place around the corner. Karaoke in Japan, unlike the West, is done in private rooms booked at an hourly rate, often with food and alcohol included. The free booze was very nice, but I admit to having felt awkward about the prospect of getting in my cups with just a granny for company. Uta, however, was enthusiastic about getting the party started and ordered us whiskey highballs and yakitori.

Downing half her glass in one go, she proceeded to queue up a whole host of old songs, mostly enka music. My God, the pipes on this woman. I understood none of what she sang, but every syllable was true, pure gold. I recognized the one that in English is called “Sukiyaki:”

*Ue o muite araokou
 Namida ga koborenai youni
 Omaidasu haru no hi
 Hitoribocchi no yoru*

I’m sure it wasn’t her age that shocked me about her

performance, and maybe her singing wasn't even that good, but I was all the way across the world, mostly alone, and dead tired from an arduous hike. Here was a virtual stranger, with generations and a language barrier between us, showing me unfathomable kindness and care. I began to weep, Uta stopped singing. She came to hold me there in the booth, repeating "Daijoubu desu, daijoubu desu," until I finally regained my composure. I didn't apologize, I didn't thank her, but went to the machine to load up some Elvis and some Roy Orbison. We went back to her hotel, where she handed me a pamphlet from the lobby, reading "MIE PREFECTURE." She said "Ise-Jingu, most sacred. Go," and I was ready to go anywhere for her if she had asked. I wound up in my room, alone again.

I went for a late breakfast the following morning at a steak sandwich place, read through the pamphlet, and Googled Ise-Jingu and how to get there. I learned that Ise-Jingu is where Amaterasu, the Japanese sun goddess and supposed progenitor of the Imperial Family lies in repose (gods typically don't die, in most traditions). Again, I was going to do whatever Uta asked of me, and I was sensitive to the religious significance of the site, but my attitude towards the Imperial Family of Japan was ambivalent at best. Oh well, my course was set. An hour-fourty-five by a limited express train the next day.

I bought a tall can of beer and an egg salad sandwich for the train. Eating and drinking on regular commuter trains is generally frowned upon, but acceptable on ones with booked seating. A Japanese man with his family sat in the aisle across from mine and facing the opposite direction, so I could see that he had purchased the exact same combo for breakfast, even the same brand of beer. I watched the Japanese countryside from the window and thought, not for the first time since I arrived, that "rural" Japan was ridiculously populated by my standards. Maybe it's just because they tend to build their homes next to and on top of one another, regardless of space available. Be-

nign-metastasis. Profoundisms. No good!

Pulling into the city of Ise, I smelled the sea. Of course, Osaka is on the ocean but it is not on the sea in a way that permeates and overcomes its metropolitanism. It was good, and deeply refreshing. According to Uta's brochure, Ise-Jingu consisted of both an inner (Naiku) and an outer (Geku) shrine, and the done thing was to visit the outer shrine first. Not that I would have done any differently, but Geku was a convenient 10-minute walk from Ise station. What can I say? I was underwhelmed. There were people milling about on the gravel paths, bowing at an important rock or more probably the bridge next to it, and a guy(?) dressed up as a god and sitting in a shed. Perhaps I was simply templed-out? Too much woowoo and too little context for one baka gaijin? I soon took a bus to the Naiku shrine regardless.

Next to Naiku is a preserved medieval shopping street, where I stopped to get Ise udon, the local specialty. These were thick-cut noodles cooked until very soft, and being an al dente guy they were not my favourite. As I was finishing the meal, a gaggle of women identically dressed in grey powersuits sat down at the bar. I'm not especially attractive, but Mie Prefecture is not a foreign tourist mainstay, and these women took an immediate (if playful) interest. One grabbed at my hair and asked "Ah, natural perm desuka?" I nodded and wondered if she just didn't know the word "curly" or if it was simply too difficult to pronounce for a Japanese speaker. Another asked if I was two meters tall (not even close), a third bought me a beer and took my photo. There was part of me that wanted to feel indignant at being gawked at, but frankly these women were too charming and too much fun. After saying our farewells and feeling quite elevated, I finally went to Naiku.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this shrine was more of the same, just bigger. More milling about, more sacred rocks and trees, another shed with another guy(?) in god

makeup. Even though it was the same, I felt different as I looked around. I looked up at the Japanese as they wandered through this holy-of-holies. “Oh my God,” I realized, “this is a leisure activity for them.” Doubtless there was some reverence and devotion involved, even if I didn’t really see it for what it was. But, principally and most importantly, all of this was just a pastime. Uta did not send me here as a seeker, but to get away from my getaway. No, I was not a seeker, but a bringer. I brought preconceived notions of the sacred, my baggage about women and sex, my own sense of self-importance, and my feeble command over wordplay and profoundism. “Hallelujah!” I thought, “I’m a moron!”

My last stop in Ise was to Meoto Iwa, the “marriage rocks,” about which I had read in the brochure. A truly beautiful view, and there was even a heron perched on one of the rocks. Lucky. I took a photo and sent it to Océane. She replied, promptly this time, “so it’s no sex before marriage, is it?”

Fuck her. I bought Uta a local sake at the train station, as thanks.

In Thy Orisons

meteor

Frank closed his eyes and walked the familiar path through their old apartment in Chicago—past the radiator that clanged like ship's bells, through the narrow kitchen where Cin had burnt the Thanksgiving turkey their first year married—until he reached the bookshelf by the window where they'd kept the Shakespeare. The book's spine appeared in his mind, green cloth worn to gray at the edges. He opened his eyes to find his wife watching a carpenter bee bore into the porch ceiling, her mouth slack.

"The expense of spirit in a waste of shame," he recited, the words coming as easily as his own name. "Is lust in action; and till action, lust..."

The Savannah heat had gotten into everything. Even with the windows shut, he could smell the river—that particular mix of salt marsh and paper mill that had made him gag when they'd first visited but now seemed as invisible as the taste of his spit. Cin sat in her grandmother's cane-backed rocker, still wearing the same yellow housedress she'd put on three days ago. A box fan from Walmart whirled in the corner, its plastic grating already filmed with dust, while overhead the original ceiling fan hung motionless, its pull-chain gone to rust.

"Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame," he continued, watching her face for any flicker of recognition. Nothing. She worked her jaw like she was chewing something, then stopped.

The movers had stacked her mother's books against the wall—leather-bound volumes on Confederate history, garden club yearbooks, photo albums thick with newspaper clippings about daughters presented at the Cotillion. His laptop sat charging on a TV tray, the screensaver cycling through book covers: *The Savannah Burning*, *Blood and Magnolias*, *Sherman's Mistress*. Historical fiction that sold well enough to buy this house cash, to pay for the private nurses who would start next week.

"Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust," Frank said, louder now, as if volume could coerce her understanding.

He'd memorized this sonnet in their first apartment, pacing the hallway while she called out corrections from the bathtub. Now he was the only one who remembered that Sunday afternoon, the smell of her lavender bath salts, the way she'd laughed when he'd forgotten "extreme" and substituted "obscene."

Cin's hand moved to her throat, fingers plucking at the collar of her dress. Outside, a tour bus groaned past, the guide's amplified voice drifting through the windows: "...one of the oldest surviving examples of Greek Revival architecture in the historic district..."

"Cin?" He knelt beside her chair, the heart pine floor sticky under his palms. "Sonnet 129. You taught it to me. Remember?"

She looked at him then, really looked, and for a moment something shifted in her gray eyes, and Frank's stomach lifted—but it was not recognition, only an animal awareness that made him think of the feral cats that lived under the porch. Then even that was gone, and she was patting his hand like he was a friendly stranger, her touch dry as Spanish moss.

"Hot," she said, the word thick and uncertain. It was the first thing she'd said all day.

*
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The basement study had been the cook's quarters once, back when the house had needed such things. Frank descended the narrow stairs, each step creaking its particular note, until he reached the brick-walled room where the air tasted of mildew and old paper. His laptop screen cast the only light, illuminating stacks of books that rose from the floor like stalagmites: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, *When the Mind Forgets*, *Neurodegenerative Disorders: A Clinical Guide*. Printouts from medical journals lay scattered across his desk, dense with terms he'd Googled and forgotten—tau proteins, amyloid plaques, cholin-

esterase inhibitors.

The cursor blinked at the end of a half-finished sentence: *General Sherman's mistress clutched the silver locket as Atlanta burned, knowing that*— Knowing what? He'd written himself into a corner again, just like the last three novels that had barely earned out their advances.

He minimized the text editor and pulled up a YouTube video: *Miracle Memory Recovery Through Poetry Recitation*. It played silently: an elderly man reciting Wordsworth while his wife smiled blankly. Frank knew the words by heart.

His iPhone buzzed on the desk—glass and steel, incongruous as a spaceship in the low room. Clara's face appeared on the screen, the photo from her college graduation, back when she still smiled at him.

"Hello, sweetheart."

Silence.

Frank closed his eyes, grimacing from his mistake. The ceiling fan above him—salvaged from a demolished cotton warehouse—turned with a sound like someone dragging chains. Above that, Cin's rocking chair, steady as a heart-beat. "Sorry," he finally said.

"She still not talking?" Clara's voice was flat, pretending disinterest.

"She said 'hot' yesterday," he offered.

A laugh, sharp as a snapped pencil. "That's great, Frank. Real progress."

It was Frank now. Never Dad, or Daddy, or Papa. He picked up a pen, rolled it between his fingers. The barrel was chewed soft. "I thought maybe you'd want to visit. She'd like—"

"She doesn't know who I am."

"She might. Sometimes she—"

"Stop." Then, quieter: "You don't get to do this. You don't get to play the devoted husband now."

Frank stared at the wall. Someone—one of the nurses, maybe—had taped a color-coded chart there: *Stages of Cog-*

nitive Decline. Stage 4 was circled in red. He had added a note in the margin, his handwriting shaky: *Still knows her own name?*

"I'm trying," he said.

"Trying to what? Rewrite the ending?"

The pen nib exploded in his hand. Ink bloomed across his palm like a vein.

"I know what I did," he said. "I know I can't—"

"Good." Her breath caught, a small, wounded sound. "I'm coming down. Next week. I've already talked to Dr. Patel about custody."

Frank's stomach lurched. "Clara—"

"She needs real care. Not your guilt project."

On the laptop screen, the woman in the video was mouthing words. The camera began to shake and Frank's mind automatically filled in the sound of grateful sobbing. "Can you afford it?" he asked, and immediately he shut his eyes again.

"Wow."

"This is her home."

"No. Was. Was her home, Frank. Right up until you fucked your—" She stopped. He could hear her swallowing rage. "I'll see you Friday."

The line went dead.

In the sudden quiet, the fan kept turning. Frank opened his hand. The ink had dried black against his lifeline. He wiped it on his jeans, but the stain stayed. Above him, the rocker had stopped. He could hear Cin moving through the house, her slippers shuffling across the heart pine floors, searching for something she'd never find.

He closed the video. The word processor came back.

General Sherman's mistress clutched the silver locket as Atlanta burned, knowing that— He deleted the sentence, then the paragraph, then the entire chapter. The cursor blinked on a blank page, patient as a headstone.

The movers were Dominican, efficient and careful with Cin's boxes in a way that made Frank know he would overtip. They spoke to each other in rapid Spanish while he pointed: bedroom, bedroom, parlor, kitchen. When they hauled a water-stained carton up from the truck, he almost sent it upstairs for sorting later, but something about its weight made him gesture toward the study instead.

"*Cuidado*," the older one said, setting it on his desk. "*Libros*."

Not books. Notebooks. Dozens of them, college-ruled composition books with marbled covers, the kind gas stations sold for ninety-nine cents.

He locked the study door and sat in the pool of laptop light, arranging the notebooks by date. His hands moved without thought, searching for spring 2009, the book tour, Chicago and Denver and Portland. Nothing. He worked backward: 2008, 2007, 2006. Still nothing. Then forward to 2011, and there—January 2011. Three months after his diagnosis.

He touched the margin where a water ring had blurred the ink. He could smell, suddenly, the lemon disinfectant of the oncology ward, the plastic scent of the recliner that unfolded into his bed. Room 433. Morning light through blinds throwing prison bars across Cin's face as she adjusted his IV line. She'd driven down from Chicago without asking, appeared in his doorway with a weekend bag and gardenias from her mother's yard, floating them in a Styrofoam cup because the nurses wouldn't allow vases. At night she'd sit with her laptop balanced on her knees, typing nothing, just keeping vigil. Sometimes she'd fall asleep in her chair and Frank would wake before her, smiling at her snoring. He would think, then, that the nearness of death made them weightless, that love was so simple when stripped to its essentials: her hand on his wrist, counting his blood like rosary beads. He wanted so badly to return there, to that hospital room.

He opened the journal.

January 14, 2011

Hate this place. Hate the smell of it. Antiseptic can't cover what's underneath—shit and fear and that sweet sick odor I remember from Mama's last days. F sleeping now, finally, after the morphine. His face yellow as coffee rings. Keep thinking about that woman. Can't help it. Wonder if she knows he's sick. Wonder if she'd come if she did. Please God don't let her know. Don't let her come.

Frank's hand jerked, nearly dropping the notebook. He flipped forward.

January 26, 2011

Radiation day. Frank asleep with his mouth open, the tube in his chest making a little tide sound. I read to him from the book he pretends not to like—those Civil War romances with the bosoms on the cover. He smiles in his sleep when I do the Southern accents. I hate how much I love that smile. Stupid stupid stupid. Why am I here? Clara furious, says I'm pathetic. She's right. Twelve years married and he couldn't keep his dick in his pants the first chance he got. Now here I am, emptying his piss bottles, pretending my heart doesn't crack every time he opens his eyes and smiles at me like I'm some kind of angel. I'm not an angel. I'm a fool. Forty-three years old and still a schoolgirl. When will I grow up?

The basement walls seemed to press closer. Frank found the March entries, after the surgery, hands shaking now.

March 3, 2011

He asked me to come back. Sitting there with his new hair growing in soft as a baby's, holding my hand like we were fifteen again. "We could try again, Cin. I know I don't deserve it, but we could try." Had to leave

the room before I said yes. I didn't cry in front of him at least. Sat in the hospital chapel for an hour, not praying anymore, afraid to now because he actually got better (thanks God, you've got a great sense of humor). Can't do it. Can't. I'm scared. I am terrified of being that happy. Feels like standing on a roof overlooking a burning city: magnificent, but the fall will kill you.

March 4, 2011

Clara thinks F didn't ask. Didn't correct her. Neither did F, bless his heart. Easier than explaining to both I'm a coward. That I'd rather have him hate me for coldness than risk him knowing he still owns me, bones and breath and the whole stupid mess of me. Soon he won't need me anymore and I can go back to Chicago and pretend this never happened. Practice my smile in the mirror: "Oh, Frank? Yes, I heard he was sick. I hope he's well." Like he's someone I used to know instead of someone who still has my heart in a lunch-box somewhere, probably lost under some old manuscripts.

Frank set the journal down. His hands were steady now, but something in his chest had come loose. Above him, Cin's footsteps traced their endless circuit: bedroom to kitchen, kitchen to parlor, parlor to bedroom. Looking for something. Looking for him, maybe, the Frank from 1987 who'd recited *To His Coy Mistress* in her ear while they danced at their wedding. Or the Frank from 2011, weak and grateful and promising to do better.

He picked up another journal, this one from last year. The handwriting had begun to waver.

Sometimes I forget his name but I remember the weight of his head in my lap during chemo. Funny what stays and what goes. Clara says I should forget

all of it, but I think the forgetting chooses itself. Maybe that's mercy. Or punishment. Maybe there's no difference.

He flipped to the last page with any words. No date, just a single sentence in the middle of a blank page, a scrawl so light he had to tilt it toward the lamp:

I would rather lose my mind than lose him again.

The rocker stopped. In the silence, Frank heard his own breathing, ragged as a child's. He pressed his palms to his eyes until he saw stars, the way you press on a bruise to prove it still hurts.

*
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The doorbell rang at six-thirty, two sharp buzzes that cut through the house like a saw. Frank opened the door to find Clara on the stoop in charcoal wool, briefcase in one hand, a manila folder in the other. The porch light caught the tiny gold scales pinned to her lapel. She did not step inside.

"Where is she?" No greeting, just business. Her heels clicked across the heart pine as she entered without invitation.

"Sleeping." Frank gestured toward the parlor where he'd set out sweet tea and store-bought cookies on Cin's mother's china. "I thought we could—"

"I have a deposition at seven tomorrow morning." Clara set her briefcase on the coffee table, snapping it open. "The papers are straightforward. Transfer of medical power of attorney, designation of primary caregiver. You can continue paying for the nurses if that salves your conscience." She held out a blue Bic to him. "You said on the phone you'd sign," Clara reminded him.

"I've changed my mind."

Clara's hands stilled. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not signing."

She straightened slowly, and in the lamplight Frank could see Cin in the set of her jaw, the way her nostrils flared slightly when angry. "We discussed this. You agreed—"

"I'm staying with her."

"Like hell you are." Clara's control cracked, her professional veneer splitting like old paint. "You want to do this the hard way?" She stopped, breathed through her nose. "Sign the papers, Frank."

"No."

"I'll destroy you." The words came out almost conversational. She was in control again, safe behind the professional mask. "I'll file for conservatorship. Drag your name through every court in Georgia. How do you think your publishers will like that? Frank Morrison, bestselling author, fighting his own daughter for custody of the wife he cheated on."

Frank thought suddenly of Dr. Helms, his thesis advisor twenty-five years ago, slumped in his office after the tenure committee's decision. The man had found proof that the university's beloved founder had owned slaves until 1889, twenty-four years after emancipation, had falsified records to keep them. The founder's great-grandson sat on the board. Helms had been naive enough to think truth mattered more than donor relations.

"History belongs to whoever tells the best story," Helms had said, bourbon heavy on his breath. "Remember that, Mr. Morrison."

Frank had remembered. Remembered it in Portland, removing his wedding ring in the hotel bathroom. Remembered it in Denver, typing a new bio for the book jacket that somehow omitted a wife. Remembered it in Chicago, in a graduate student's apartment that smelled like patchouli and cannabis, telling himself he was writing a better story for his life.

"Frank?"

"I was terrified," he blurted out. "The book was selling, really selling, and suddenly everyone wanted to know Frank Morrison. Radio interviews, speaking engagements, faculty parties where people actually listened when I talked. And at home..." He trailed off, seeing again Cin's face over breakfast, patient and loving and absolutely unimpressed by his newfound fame. "At home I was still just Frank who forgot to take out the garbage."

Color rose along Clara's jaw. "So you threw her away instead."

"Yes." No revision, no euphemism. "I just... I wanted to feel important. I wanted someone who'd look at me like I was brilliant instead of just familiar. It was selfish and stupid and cruel."

Clara's eyes glittered. There was no mercy in them. "Do you know she mortgaged the house to pay for my law school? Told me it was from her mother's estate. I didn't find out until I was doing title work for the divorce." Her voice cracked. "She mortgaged her grandmother's house—this house—so I could become a lawyer, while you were sending checks she wouldn't accept. Playing the generous father with money that should have been hers. And you want to keep her *here*?"

Frank closed his eyes. He could see Cin bent over her checkbook, calculating interest, too proud to take his money but not too proud to help their daughter. The same woman who'd written *I would rather lose my mind than lose him again*.

"I know she's better than me," he said quietly. "Ruin me. I don't care. I'm not leaving her."

She stood so fast the chair scraped like a scream. "Then I'll see you in court. And when Mom dies—because she will, Frank, sooner than later—I'll make sure you're not in the room."

He flinched as if struck. "Clara—"

She was already at the door. He followed, catching her elbow on the threshold. "Please. I know what I cost you. I

know I can't fix it. But let me stay with her. Let me—"

She shook him off. The porch light caught the wetness in her eyes before she turned away. "I'll send a process server tomorrow."

The Cadillac's taillights disappeared down Jones Street, red slashes swallowed by live oaks. Frank stood on the porch until the cicadas sounded like static. When he went back inside, Cin had left her chair. He found her in the kitchen, opening and closing the same cabinet door, looking for something she couldn't name.

He guided her back to the rocker, knelt beside her. "I'm staying," he told her, though she gave no sign of hearing. "Whatever comes."

Later, in the basement, he opened the last journal again. The final entry was dated three weeks ago, the handwriting barely legible:

Memory is a house with too many rooms. I keep opening doors and finding you there, younger each time. If I forget everything else, let me keep this: you once loved me enough to die. And I loved you enough to keep you from death. That has to count for something.

Frank stared at the cursor on his laptop. He held down the backspace key, then frustrated with the slow erasure, selected the entire manuscript and hit delete. A new document opened, blank and patient. He typed a title at the top:

The House That Remembers: A Wife's Account of Love and Forgetting

His fingers hovered. Somewhere above, Cin's footsteps traced their slow circle. He began to write.

The Zoom window bloomed open at nine sharp, Frank's face relegated to the bottom corner while his publisher, Martin Goldstein, filled the center frame. Behind Martin, floor-to-ceiling windows showed Manhattan in miniature, a city Frank hadn't visited in three years.

"Frank, this is extraordinary." Martin held up a printout, pages fanned like playing cards. "Raw, honest, deeply moving. We're looking at major prizes here. National Book Award, certainly. Maybe even Pulitzer."

Frank shifted in his basement chair. Above him, the floorboards creaked—Cin's morning circuit beginning.

"It reminds me of *Tuesdays with Morrie*," Martin continued. "That same sense of—"

"It's nothing like that." The words came out sharper than Frank intended.

Martin's smile flickered but held. "Of course not. Yours has more... complexity. Which brings me to my notes." He set down the pages, steeped his fingers. "Small changes, really. Nothing that compromises the integrity. But Frank, some of these journal entries..." He cleared his throat. "The affair material. Do we need quite so much detail about your... lapses?"

Frank stared at the thumbnail of himself in the corner: unshaven, eyes ringed, the basement's brick wall behind him like a cell. "Those are Cin's words."

"Exactly. And she's clearly emotional, possibly already affected by her condition. We could frame it more as a midlife crisis, less as a betrayal. Show your journey back to her. The redemption arc is what sells, Frank."

"No."

Martin leaned forward, his face growing larger on screen. "Frank, be reasonable. The sections about her anger, her drinking after the divorce—"

"She drank wine. Occasionally. When she was sad."

"—they make her seem unstable. Readers want inspiration, not reality. We soften those edges, highlight your devotion now, and we have a bestseller that still honors her memory."

Frank thought of Dr. Helms again, how the committee had offered him a deal: bury the research, get tenure, everyone wins. Helms had refused and ended up teaching high school in Valdosta.

“Martin—”

“I went to bat for you, Frank.” Martin’s voice had gone cold. “After *Magnolias* tanked, I kept you on my list when twenty younger writers were begging for your spot.” He paused, let that sink in. “This book could resurrect your career.”

The ultimatum hung unspoken: change it or be changed.

Frank closed his eyes. September 1979, the gymnasium at Benedictine Military School. Eighth grade dance, disco ball throwing light like shattered glass. He’d been standing by the punch bowl, watching his best friend Kevin sulk after being dumped by Marcy Something-ham. Across the gym, Marcy’s best friend—a girl with yellow hair and knobby knees—marched toward him like Sherman toward the sea.

“You need to tell Kevin to stop calling Marcy,” she’d announced.

“You need to tell Marcy to give back his Jean-Michel Jarre tape,” Frank had countered.

They’d glared at each other while “Le Freak” thumped through bad speakers. She smelled like Love’s Baby Soft and something else—gardenias, he’d realize later, from her mother’s garden. When she smiled suddenly, victorious about something he didn’t understand, Frank felt his chest crack open like an egg.

“I’m Hyacinth,” she’d said. “But everyone calls me Cin.”

“I know who you are.”

She’d studied him then, head tilted. “You’re that boy who reads during recess.”

“So?”

“So nothing. I just noticed.”

She’d walked away, leaving Frank with a strange hollow feeling, like hunger but different. He wouldn’t speak to her

again for two years, but he'd never stopped noticing her after that—Cin reading *Flowers in the Attic* behind her textbook in study hall, Cin laughing with Marcy by the lockers, Cin standing alone at the bus stop with rain in her yellow hair. Cin kissing him for the first time under a tree at Forsyth Park.

Frank blinked back to the screen. "I'll find another publisher."

"Frank—"

He clicked End Call before Martin could finish.

The afternoon heat had broken by the time Frank helped Cin into the car. She moved carefully, one hand on his arm, the other clutching the doorframe. He'd dressed her in the blue sundress she'd worn to Clara's high school graduation, though it hung loose now, shoulder blades sharp as wings beneath the fabric.

They drove through Savannah's squares, past houses that looked like wedding cakes and houses that looked like tombs. At the park, he parked beneath the live oaks and came around to help her out. She stood blinking in the filtered light, Spanish moss moving overhead like seaweed.

"Know where we are?" he asked, not expecting an answer.

He'd brought a blanket, the plaid one from their first apartment. They sat beneath a tree, not the one he remembered (he couldn't find it) but one close to the fountain, watching tourists pose for photographs. A jogger passed, ponytail swinging. A child chased pigeons in circles, shrieking with joy.

Frank pulled out his phone, navigating to the poem he had saved there this morning though he didn't need to look at the words. John Donne, holy sonnet 10. Cin sat beside him, plucking grass with careful fingers, examining each blade like it held some essential secret.

"Death, be not proud," he began, "though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."

A breeze moved through the park, carrying the smell of

somewhere else—salt marsh maybe, or rain coming. Cin had gone still, grass forgotten in her lap.

“For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,” Frank continued, “die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.”

He felt rather than saw her turn toward him. Her breathing had changed, grown deeper. He kept his eyes on the fountain, afraid to break whatever spell was building, trying to forget its temporariness.

“From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow. And soonest our best men with thee do go—”

“Rest of their bones,” Cin said, her voice rusty but clear, “and soul's delivery.”

Frank's vision blurred. He reached for her hand, found it already reaching for his.

the end

