

Here and There

When Yui Nishikawa returns to Yokohama from her days abroad as a student and translator in Dublin, she finds herself feeling out of place in the city where she was born. She must try to reassemble those parts of her that feel disconnected by reuniting with her childhood friends and overcoming the vicious anonymity of their unending city and the thousand strangers always looking away at something else.

Over a number of years, she finds reflections of herself in the lonely nooks of Tokyo and Yokohama, the strange idiosyncrasies of its residents and guests, the transformations and unknowable parts of her friends, and in the enigmatic and aimless painter Charlie who, like her, is searching for something to quiet the ache of feeling lost.

A moody and introspective look into loneliness, distance, and intimacy *Here and There* is a dreamlike depiction of the ghostly textures covering the surface of the world and those we love.

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Here and There

by Brendan Marx

Contents

Chapter 1	Jellyfish	4
Chapter 2	Stage	44
Chapter 3	Karaoke	98
Chapter 4	Sulphur	130
Chapter 5	Frame	176
Chapter 6	Episodes	218
Chapter 7	Dunes	237

Chapter 1 – Jellyfish

The more she stood there, the weirder they became. *Alien Umbrellas*. Tentacles dangled out of them and rippled with each pulse of their milky, cloudlike bodies. The walls around them were painted black, with lights illuminating the surface of the water. It looked as though the jellyfish were floating in nothingness, the reflection of light on their tentacles tricking Yui into thinking there was electricity in the water.

Lifting onto the toes of her boots, she lowered her arm over the railing and reached down for the surface of the water of the tank they nicknamed the *Big Petri Dish* – a bowl of luminous microbes. Jellyfish dotted the sides of the room, each of which housed a glass tank for the creatures and, save for the ceiling, the visitors of the Sumida Aquarium jellyfish display were surrounded by the ghostlike things in what looked like a bioluminescent forest of tentacles and transparent domes. She reached down to feel the electricity crawl up her nerves.

‘Don’t touch, Yui. It’s not allowed.’ Yui’s grandmother touched her elbow and lifted it away from the water. She was always gentle with her. Yui didn’t look up at her but continued to watch the elastic membranes floating in the light. The colour alternated from a sterilized white to an arctic blue and after another minute, to a seafoam green, the jellyfish glowing with each colour as they alternated like something in them was changing.

Mrs. Nishikawa lowered herself into a squat, but then had to look up into her granddaughter’s eyes. Those slate eyes, blue in daylight, never failed to make her heart ache for what she was, and what she was going to be.

‘Look at those two, Little. It almost looks like they’re dancing, don’t you think?’

‘Maybe they’re a couple.’ The jellyfish circled each other, floating a little slower than all the others. ‘Do jellyfish fall in love, *oba-chan*?’

‘I don’t know.’ Yui was unaware her grandmother didn’t know something. She was always telling her things. She taught her how to play cards and what popcorn toppings were the best. Her brain seemed full of an impossible number of things. This was the first time Yui heard her say she didn’t know something.

‘When they want to make more jellyfish, they either do it alone, by breaking off a piece of themselves to make another, or they do it with the help of another jellyfish, but without touching. A jellyfish leaves a message and another picks it up and reads it and makes a baby with the message.’

‘Like my mother?’ Yui looked into the water, searching again, as a soft pink-purple washed over her and the creatures, colouring the contours of her cheeks and reflecting in the water of her eyes that were not at all Japanese.

It was hard for Mrs. Nishikawa to accept that Yui was 11 now, and her thoughts were fast becoming acute, forming out of the nebulous emotions of childhood into thoughts you could write down. She needed to be more cautious about what she said and parts of her sunk into her belly thinking she caused Yui sadness.

‘Yes. Like your mother.’

A waft of wet penguin feathers assaulted Yui’s nose, and she could hear them splashing about in the adjacent room, punctuated by the barks of seals. The ambient sounds issuing from the speakers gave the impression

that everything was submerged in the ocean as all the other visitors of the aquarium slowly forgot all the tasks and terrors of Tokyo outside.

But all she could think about was her mother – how much her mother was like a jellyfish. Visitors moved in currents around Yui and her grandmother. They carried on invisibly around them just as Yui and her grandmother faded into the background of the aquarium with everyone else, in the mass of other visitors; orbiting things full of feeling and aches, busy with their little worlds; their quiet victories and passing failures; their burdening secrets, and thorny fears. All forgettable when sleep carried them away, rinsing their memories out with dreams.

‘I think jellyfish can love, hey *oba*?’

‘Me too, Little.’ A jellyfish floated passed Yui. She touched her fingertips to the glass of the tank.

‘I see you.’

-

The day Yui left for Dublin, three days after her 19th birthday, was the third time Mrs. Nishikawa felt like she’d lost someone. With a charmingly disheveled suitcase and a couple of her English Literature degree course books, Yui waited just outside the queue to the security check. Mrs. Nishikawa looked at her.

‘When did you get so big, Little?’ Tears falling off her cheeks as she took her granddaughter’s hands in hers. She thought quietly to herself how much of the world was seen through the hands, through a blind fumbling for things, a different kind of sight. What would become of her granddaughter’s hands? Would she recognize them when they came back?

She didn’t want to let them go. She wanted to keep Yui all to herself

and continue their cinema visits on the weekends, their game show arguments on the couch before bed, the gorgeous triviality of shopping with someone who knew the things you liked. After losing her husband and then her daughter, Yui was the only real connection Mrs. Nishikawa had.

She tried to say goodbye then in a mismatch of words that never managed to say how she felt. Halfway through the line, Mrs. Nishikawa called out to her granddaughter.

‘Hey Little! Don’t cut up anyone’s shoes, okay?’ And they half laughed, and half cried at each other through the little aperture they found between strangers, their shared memory, waving goodbye in a way only people who are about to put an ocean and years between each other do.

When her backpack passed through the x-ray machine, and was given to her, she looked back and her grandmother waved again, both of them shaking, heaving. A stranger had to run up to Yui to give her her laptop which she left in the plastic tray of the machine, too caught up in her grandmother’s wrinkled and distraught face to have remembered it or anything that wasn’t the promise she’d made to come back.

But her grandmother forgave her because she cleaned and bandaged her grass burns after baseball trials and bought Yui her first *Kyūdō* bow that left red welts on her forearm as she learned to control the bowstring. Because she looked at her granddaughter in her second week of elementary school, her schoolbag double her size, and in the noise of the classroom asked if she wanted to go see a movie instead. They bunked school and work together and covered their salty popcorn in chocolates, taking off the pickles of their cheeseburgers after the film because they both hated pickles. She forgave her because she knew Yui had to do this, to

gobble up existence from all its cities the way she wanted to but never could.

The first thing Yui noted as she exited the airport and the Dublin cold bit at her neck was how everything smelled different. She had never thought of Yokohama as having a distinctive quality to it that hung in the air and poked at foreign noses in the same way someone's clothing only had a smell to everyone but the wearer. She would wear this city, dress herself in its streetlights and architecture until the colours faded out and the fabric tore at the ends. Until it became something of a home.

When she closed the door to her new room, all the anxiety surging in her body, the voices of her new unknown flatmates down the hall so full of confidence and excitement, so unlike her, she opened her suitcase and found a box of *Meiji* milk chocolate and a note from her friend Rika. *Hurry back.* Yui thumbed it into onto the wall with some sticky tack, then unpacked all the things she brought with her.

But time had a funny way of passing, of being perfectly static, then all at once a blur of new buildings, foreigners, autumn leaves in the streets, assignments, celebrations, failures, moving houses, romances, and choices that, looking back, weren't as urgent as they seemed at the time. That was how Dublin passed for Yui. It was more a dream than a city, more a memory than a history. The day she took the bus back to the airport, after her Japanese accent was chiseled out and she adopted the more lyrical tones of the Dubliners, felt like the same day she'd arrived and breathed in the musty, salty air of the city.

The experience was compressed to a return bus ride full of anxiety – there and back. On the way in she was anxious that her flat mates wouldn't like her, that she'd be misunderstood, that her classes would be too

difficult, nights too long, and loneliness heavy in her chest. Then on her way out, that she'd miss her friends, the naïve and goofy Hugo with his French paté, or moody Gabriela who was always out of rolling paper but never tobacco. Or Julia with her ukelele and boisterous wine-drunk dancing, blood on her lips. Anxious that they'd forget her, that she'd be able to smell Yokohama for the first time when she got back.

And all of this was true. All of it happened. All of it left behind in a charmingly disheveled suitcase in a Dublin full of disenchanted artists and musicians and filmmakers, that curled their backs over desks, clicking through emails and spreadsheets with hangovers as fierce as their regrets.

Some sleepless nights Yui would lie awake in her lamplit and crammed apartment populated by various potted plants and novels, cuddling a sleepy, stray kitten that would sneak in for cuddles from time to time, and she'd think of Yokohama, how far away it seemed. She'd torture herself with unkind thoughts; how she'd abandoned her grandmother to find the missing parts of her, but how she instead dashed and divided herself in the boroughs of the city and the arms of others looking for the same thing she was; strangers more ghosts than lovers. Yokohama was so far away. But so was Dublin, even as she looked down into the mud of the Liffey, awash with the smell of hops from the Guinness factory across the river. Dublin was so far away. And now, so was she as the captain of the plane announced their landing at Haneda airport and she tried to remember what home was like.

-

For some reason, the first thing she decided to do after landing back in Tokyo after her years abroad in Dublin, was visit the Sumida Aquarium.

She went straight there, lied to her grandmother that there was a delay with her baggage at the airport because she just wasn't ready. The gentleman at reception of the aquarium was kind enough to stow her luggage at the front desk without her having to ask a second time.

Some 15 years passed since she was last here with her grandmother. She couldn't say what it was that pulled her back into the aquarium after all those years. Nostalgia, perhaps. Or maybe she just needed something to ground her, to walk through a memory to prove that her life hadn't slipped too far out of reach.

A number of the exhibits were swapped out for others and, though the aquarium had a different air to it, it was much the same, still full of young couples on first or last dates, and families bouncing around with excited children looking in at the oceanic world before running off to the next tank. The jellyfish tanks remained unchanged. Time seemed to have little effect on the jellyfish and that aspect of the floating aliens ebbed out into the room that kept them.

Yui wondered if any of the jellyfish were the same ones she saw with her grandmother, a little embarrassed she didn't know the lifespan of the species in the tanks and floating under a glass bridge in the *Big Petri Dish*. She couldn't remember if the glass bridge was new or not.

Traces of that little girl in the boots and poofy raincoat were betrayed in her micro-expressions as she read the details written on all the board, ambling through the changing lights with her arms crossed in front of her; a thoughtful tilt of her head, touching her lips; and those slate eyes. The glass of the tank was cold against her fingertips as she pushed them against it just in front of her face and thought to herself, *I see you*.

The grey pastel mask she wore exaggerated her sharp features and

was resting over a thin, angular nose that looked as though it were cast from metal and set in her skull with a frame of black hair that hung evenly on either side of her face. There was something synthetic about her, something evasive, and you couldn't help but feel a vague loneliness when you looked at her, her lower eyelids seemed to want to bury those eyes that were always evading others, but always observing.

Presently, she wore the black Autumn coat she'd bought in Dublin. With various deformations, it draped just passed her knees over her thin frame, made thinner by her choice of tight black jeans and a knitted jumper.

To the rest of the aquarium, however, she was a blot of motion, and everyone carried on around her without taking much notice of the *almost* Japanese girl with her arms crossed, almost bumping into her here and there, but failing to do even that. She was nothing more than an extra in their films and, for the most part, this was how she felt, perfectly unexceptional. That little girl with the chubby cheeks had been dismantled, hammered out and reforged into this pensive creature that looked as though she were crafted for a different world.

A girl came into her periphery, a junior high school girl by Yui's estimation. She rested her palms on the edge of the information board and examined the tidbits of details.

'Oh, pardon me, were you reading?'

'No, that's okay. Go ahead.'

The girl showed no sign of emotion. Nodded, and continued reading, now at a distance from the board.

'There is never enough information on these things, don't you think?'

The aplomb of the girl struck Yui as odd. It was not like a Japanese teenager to ask things of a stranger. Yui became concerned that her invisibility had been compromised or that the girl failed to recognize her as Japanese seeing the half of her that was foreign, the half of her that was missing.

‘Yes, quite right.’

‘I think I’d like to be poisonous.’ She watched the fibrous nerves of the jellyfish ripple in the water. ‘I could touch something and, if I wanted, it would die. Don’t you think that would be useful, to kill with your fingertips. Or maybe your tongue.’ Again, little display of emotion, just the careful tracking of the jellyfish with her eyes, as she stepped closer to the tank. Washed in the blue light of the display.

Yui paused, trying to think of what to say. ‘You’d have to wear gloves.’ She joked.

‘Maybe.’ The girl bowed and moved off.

What an odd girl. Yui watched her disappear into the crowd of visitors like an apparition. The thought of a stranger talking to her would have made Yui freeze up and look at the floor, but she was different now and despite the oddness of the topic, the conversation left a lightness in her. Her thoughts pulsing in the denseness of the world, the strangeness of it. It was comforting to know that weirdness was not just within her.

Just then she remembered a video her grandmother showed her of her mother trying *fugu* for the first time, an awkward VHS recording that was full of nostalgic imperfections. Later, when her grandmother dusted off the collection of old cassette tapes of her and Akiko, Yui’s mother, she had them converted and stored on a disk to avoid the degradation of tape and the loss of her memory. When her grandmother was out returning

books to the library, Yui inserted the disk into their old desktop and saw her mother for the first time, heard her for the first time emitting her light out of the clunky CRT monitor.

When technology improved and she could find her way around a computer with more efficiency, she transferred her favourite videos of her mother to her cellphone. And now, standing in front of the tank, after a strange girl dreamed of being poisonous, she remembered her mother tasting *fugu*, like an out of place memory slotted into her brain.

What do they do with the poison after they cut it out? Is it safe to eat? Mrs. Nishikawa laughed behind the camera, reassuring her daughter that it was more than delicious. She clumsily zoomed into the skeptical face of her daughter who touched her lip in doubt.

Let's try a piece together Aki-chan.

Yui tapped the screen of her phone in her pocket and thought of taking it out. But she'd memorized the movements of all the clips she copied over, the cadences of her mother's voice, almost carving the textures of it into her throat. She wondered what things her mother would have said to her when, like now, existence got all tangled up in her chest and she didn't know what to do, or who to be, the haunted little machine in her pocket, full of ghosts and memories.

How easily distracted she was. The information board came back into focus in the form of the characters for *passive*. *Passive me in a glass box*. She wondered what the information board below her exhibit would read.

-

Emotionless mannequin. Prefers isolation and halflit rooms. Collects plushies and weird photographs. Species: human. Bored by most conversation. Or perhaps: Deranged insect, vulnerable to cake. Secret interest in strange pornography. Collects socks and cannot cook. Species: worm. Bored of all the mud. Always a couple minutes early for a rendezvous.

These and an array of other permutations turned in her mind as Yui walked through the indifferent buildings of the city later that day. She smiled at some and cringed at others, questioning if her grandmother would approve of such information, thinking then that she wouldn't, then remembering the intensity of the hug she gave her when she returned home after the aquarium, the offer of a thousand dishes because some people expressed their love in food.

Would anyone stop to read the information board of her exhibit? Would they consider her strange, alien? Perhaps a girl would identify with her and tell a stranger about how she'd like to collect socks. Or that she'd like to be poisonous.

Light was coming to an end and night began its crawl over the city as office workers exited buildings with the levity of a finished day and the excitement of Tokyo's nightlife waking in their chests. Clouds of masked silhouettes in suits formed outside automatic doors, chatting the last few minutes of daylight away as the day pushed back night and the sky lost its darkened blue tone to a palette of neon lights that saturated the darkness with various colours and brought with it a vicious anonymity deepened by masks and the proximity of bodies.

When the day began its fade, the calculated and efficient Tokyo was slowly forgotten, cast aside and replaced by something guttural, something

imprecise and vulgar that was impossible to attach a word to. It was a feeling, a cruel or carnal thought, a gentle madness that overwrites all reason and clears the mind of the day's analytics and transactions. If anything, the strict formality of the city accelerated feelings of longing, as hours upon hours of squashing what you were under a vast corporate mass maddened an isolation that left a hole in the bellies of everyone in the city, a hole they longed to fill with conversation, intoxication, and touch.

The arrival of night pocketed Tokyo into a luminous fog of bodily impulses and moody lights aglow over flesh and concrete. A catalyst for all undoing. Alleyways and dark rooms became theatres of unconscious revolts, stages of drunken exclamations or sexual acquiescence where the disenchanted of Tokyo could abandon their daily performances and undress all falsity in a haze of intoxication and lust, printing themselves in the night sky with desperate voices, or on the skin of a momentary lover with desperate hands. To most, nothing could be more deplorable. To others, nothing more inviting.

Yui remembered what it felt like; how there was a similar feeling in Dublin, like a language of body that vibrated in everything with a pulse. Sometimes it felt like the only thing connecting her to this world and though she often paid little attention to it, some nights she was tempted by it all and intrigued by the underworld.

If Yui recalled correctly, there was a dingy little porn store just around the corner. She turned, dodged some exhausted pedestrians, and saw the XXX signs across the street. The store was still there. There were cardboard cut outs of the latest models and their releases around the entrance, posters and pictures in the windows, nothing too crass but inappropriate enough for a street. Her and Rika had snuck into a store just

like this in Yokohama when they were in high school and gulped down the sight of all the DVD covers and magazines in the ceiling high shelves.

‘Look how flexible this girl is.’ Rika turned an opened magazine to Yui. ‘I can’t do that. Do you think you could do that?’

‘Is there something you girls are looking for?’ The clerk or owner asked from the bottom of the aisle, moving towards them. He could see they were in high school uniforms but made no attempt to remove them from the store they technically should not be allowed in. ‘We have new toys in the front if you’d like to see.’

Yui visibly cringed at the sliminess of his voice. ‘I think we should leave.’ She said under her breath.

‘Just ignore him, he’s just a pervert.’

Yui grabbed Rika’s hand. ‘Please can we leave?’

Yui was curious to go back in and see if an equally greasy man was skulking around the aisles, offering his opinions on the best new releases or the best toys to stuff yourself in or stuff into yourself. How weird and lonely it must be to run such a store. Yui pitied him, looking at the synthetic air brushed skin of the models on the posters outside. But something in her ached a little, she envied a realness in them that, though was edited out of the images, maybe existed somewhere in them. Did they love what they do, or were they just pretending? She didn’t go into the shop, afraid that she would fall into that world that tempted her and, again, become something different.

This feeling, this wanting mood, however, was never absolute, never anything more than a temporary dissolution reversed by the start of the morning trains; that first automatic announcement marking a return to order, a return to the fictions of daily life. Passengers huddled together,

erased the few memories of the night before, and continued to live their automated lives, losing their footing to the train's inertia and shifting as a single mass of bodies through the underground tunnels without any thought of the night to come. There was the day, and nothing else.

An aroma of sizzling gyoza descended from a vent somewhere above her, infiltrating Yui's mask and sending a tingle down her spine as she dreamed of tasty things to ease the rumble in her tummy. She felt a little weak with hunger and for a second didn't notice the traffic light change, thinking instead of what she was going to say to her friends after her years away, and what they were going to order to eat.

Her stomach rumbled again, and she cursed her fast metabolism and insatiable hunger. How she wasn't a fat ball of a creature was beyond her and all her friends. She could eat all day and still feel hungry when she got into bed. Perhaps it was better than getting chubby, but she feared she might never get to experience that and secretly hoped for it when she got old. A belly to balance things on and house the comforts of age.

Yui found herself gravitating toward the nearest convenience store looking to placate the rumble of hunger for another hour or so. She waited for the automatic doors, doused her hands with the alcohol disinfectant and looked up into the white light of the *kombini*. It was the first she'd entered one since returning to Japan and the Tokyo *kombini* welcomed her with the familiar greetings and the pang of nostalgia. Locals to the area filled their baskets with weekend treats. Construction workers grabbed beers and ready meals, still covered in paint and dust. But convenience stores always had a lonely feeling to them, and there were never enough customers to take that away.

All the products, packets of goodies stored and shelved carried with

them a memory or two, hidden in them like a prize you can't wait to take out and hold in your hand. *Poiful* jellybeans, *Meiji* chocolate, *Pocky* biscuit and chocolate sticks, or the interminable battle between *Takenoko no sato* and *Kinoko no yama* chocolate biscuits shaped as mushrooms or bamboo shoots respectively.

Though she recognized almost everything on the shelves, the *kombini* was permeated with an unreality that clung to her. She half expected another customer to whisper 'run' as they passed her, careful not to betray their transgression to the CCTV cameras. She felt again the odd density of things and the strangeness of it all as she picked up the *Kinoko* – to her the obvious victor of the two types of chocolate biscuits' delicious conflict. She added to her arms a box of spicy cod roe *Jaggariko* potato sticks and her tummy spoke in excitement.

At the counter she slipped right back into the automatic exchange she'd had a thousand times before with the new addition of asking for a pack of cigarettes, *Lucky Strikes*. She wanted to ask how the clerk's, a high school boy perhaps, day was going, but couldn't find the words in Japanese. Her language felt strange in her own mouth and for the first time, the automated interaction of a convenience store stirred something in her.

Leaning against a lamppost outside, waiting for the hour she was to meet her friends, Yui nibbled at her goodies. The spices of the *Jaggariko* collapsed the space of her absence from Japan, and made Dublin feel a faint dream she couldn't completely remember.

As she chewed, she thought of all those things in the *kombini*, the flavours of the *Jaggariko* activating in her mouth. She let them fall over her tongue and bring with them the idea that we are not so different from

those little boxes and packets of tastes on the shelves, full of air, waiting to be desired by a stranger, to be wanted and chosen, and taken somewhere far away; to be opened up and emptied out, devoured in the soft light of lamps and green, blue, grey, black eyes? And yet, most of the things on offer at that *kombini* don't make it further than a couple stations over.

She wanted to be carried away, but found herself back where she started, stored somewhere in the back out of sight. All the invisible things in her ached and no one knew, and everyone knew.

'Yui?' The tone of Rika's voice hinted at uncertainty, like the girl in front of her wasn't Yui, like she couldn't be sure. When Yui lifted off the lamppost and turned all the recognizable parts of her friend tugged at the feelings in her. The pale features, tired eyes, all diaphanous like a *miko*, tending to a shrine, waiting for the world to end so that she could relight the incense and it could start again. All that was missing were the red *hakama* blowing in the wind around her legs. Her dark brown dyed hair, the *Ginza* fashion, a delicate dress covered with a round jacket and heeled boots all betrayed that she was nothing like a *miko*, that things were never as they looked and as Yui looked at her, the mischievous smile of her friend turned the city back into *home*. 'You're smoking now?'

'They're for Ryota.'

'Ah yes, the pensive prince.' Rika puffed up her cheeks like a balloon and mockingly imitated how she imagined some pompous monarch would've smoked, ashing the imaginary cigarette onto the ground. And then felt immediately embarrassed, as if she'd just done that with a stranger.

'Don't forget to tap your top lip.' Yui, offered Rika some of her snacks, residues of her laughter in her smile.

‘No thanks, we are going to eat, silly, don’t fill your stomach.’

‘You know I can’t even if I tried. Where is Ryota?’

‘Gone to get us the best table of course. And brood. So, do I have to speak English to you now? *Could you tell me where the post office is?*’

‘No. I can’t, I am new here.’ Yui threw away the packaging of her treats.

‘I missed you.’ A second’s hesitation, then a hug from Rika, gentler than Yui remembered. They started off down the street and Yui looked back over her shoulder at the convenience store.

‘What are you looking at?’

-

An air of awkwardness passed between them, and they soon fell back into their old rhythms. They caught up with each other about the last drowsy years they had not seen each other, months they dragged through calendars and empty offices on opposite sides of the globe. They exchanged fragments of their loves, their comedies, and tragedies, piecing together a picture of the all the things they’ve missed.

Yui did most of the listening. Episodes and exaggerated characters unfolded from Rika’s words; impression after impression danced through her mind like the shadow puppet show Yui remembered seeing once when she was little. She drank in the stories while dreading the quaintness of her own past months. When asked, she told Rika about the more interesting documents she had most recently translated (which she felt were nowhere near any approximation to interesting at all), mostly legal documents with a handful of financial reports and dull copywriting.

‘And did you visit all the museums, the parks? Did you fall in love?’

Tell me you fell in love and danced all night and walked home holding hands over bridges.’

Yui felt a terrible urge to lie and blushed at her friend’s question. A comic formality found her instead. ‘I did some of those things, yes.’

‘Always the quiet one, hey Yui? Tell me, tell me!’ Rika’s vivacity broiled out of her and seemed to charge the lights of the street. Yui felt herself diminish in the light.

‘I, eh, I did not fall in love.’

‘You liar. You know I always know when you lie.’ Rika winked at Yui and had to jump out the way to avoid an exhausted businessman sleepwalking to the station. ‘Do you think he’s drunk?’ She asked, walking in reverse, squinting at the suit as it dragged the body inside it home.

‘I’d hate to be that drunk.’

‘Was your lover a fiery poet who refused to carry a briefcase? I bet he smelled of whiskey and sweat.’

‘There isn’t much to tell.’

Rika pushed Yui’s shoulder and heaved a sigh of despair.

‘I’ll make those cupcakes you like for your first visit if you tell me.’

Yui looked down at her sneakers. Then something in her changed, something was undone, and an anomalous feeling tugged at all the muscles in her. She didn’t know what to tell Rika, didn’t know how. Rika felt it immediately, the anomaly mirroring itself in her, but before she could say anything, Yui answered.

‘It doesn’t matter much now. They are far away.’

The noise of the city infiltrated their conversation for the first time. They were both then aware of the all the space between them. Rika refused, of course, to let that touch of sadness in Yui go uncured.

‘Well, I fell in love recently. I didn’t catch his name, actually, but he was a charming sort, just your type. A little short maybe.’

Rika broke into an anecdote of a gentleman in his ending years who had come to the travel agency where she worked and had tried to purchase a ticket to somewhere other than Japan – without specification. He urged Rika to choose quickly and supply the ticket with haste, an unprecedented urgency in his eyes – one squinted and the other not – that darted around the office. Rika took to the stage as they searched for their izakaya, determined to brush away the sadness off her friend’s expressions with laughter:

‘I must leave, you see. Today. This afternoon. Yes, yes. Anywhere. No, no I don’t mind, but please hurry if you will.’ He looked over his shoulder and then back at Rika with the unmistakable look of terror in his crooked eyes and a twitch in his lips. He leaned forward and under his breath whispered: ‘They found it, in the ice, you see. I cannot stay.’ Then without warning he lifted himself from the seat at Rika’s desk and announced that he would take his leave. He thanked Rika, bowed and doddered away without an explanation or a ticket, his distrustful eyes tirelessly darting about as he hobbled through the door, back bent with the madness of age.

Rika recreated the scene and Yui laughed with adoration at her friend’s performance. Rika looked over to her supervisor, whose dumbfounded expression beneath his parted hair, was priceless and the two of them, unable to sustain the illusion, retreated into the backroom to laugh quietly and gather themselves. Rika bowed graciously at the end of her performance, pleased that she had stolen the earlier tension and buried it under giggles. Yui asked some questions, and both were left thinking

how odd it was that people like that actually existed.

‘I’ll be sure to get his number for you next time.’

‘Did he have a charming smile?’

‘More like the look of a deranged professor.’

‘Oh, you do know I like the deranged types.’

‘Of course, little shoe cutter. And the brooders.’ Repeating the earlier imitation of her brother.

‘Ugh, leave me alone.’

A bus full of passengers passed them, the light inside made it look like a moving house, full of strangers whose bodies touched, but nothing else.

‘You’re different, you know that?’

‘I am?’ Yui was unsure of how to respond. ‘How?’

‘Just different. You carry yourself differently.’

Yui became aware of her own body, the way it moved and felt, how it housed her and was her and wasn’t her. She felt awkward.

‘Not in a bad way. You are still quiet, but its different. As if your shyness isn’t out of fear anymore, but something else. Poise maybe.’

‘I didn’t know.’

They continued quietly for a minute.

‘And me, Yu-chan? Am I different?’

-

‘Did you miss me?’ Ryota was stretched out over the *izakaya* booth, as cool as the northern tides and as detached as the northern snows. He ashed his cigarette, watched it fall, then touched his upper lip.

‘How could a crane miss a tuna, like you?’ Rika teased, squashing

his nostrils together trying to get him to cough out the cloud of tobacco in his chest, but he didn't. He formed a fin on his crown with his empty hand and moved his body like a fish, puffing his cheeks.

'I bought you those *Lucky's*, didn't I?'

'Lucky me. Lucky tuna.' Ryota pushed the embers of his cigarette into the ashtray.

'Beer?' Rika bounced her eyebrows twice, flaring her nostrils like a mischievous child.

'They're coming.'

A comical lad mad in the eyes rushed over with a tray of the cheapest izakaya beer, more water than beer perhaps, but it got the job done. He slid them over the wooden table and rushed off in response to a bellowing call from another drunken customer. He looked as though cursed to move in fast-forward until his limbs caved in. Flames under skewers of chicken gave the room a smoky atmosphere, sweetened by the thousands of alcohol spillages that soaked into the wood furniture.

Ryota, without moving his lanky body extended his arm and dragged the frothy beer over. Yui admired the form of his biceps and vascular forearms, swimmer's arms that always moved as though the air were water. Her mouth was dry. They toasted and drank quietly, the girls eyeing each other and Ryota looking deep into the bubbles of the beer.

The sip lasted more than all perhaps intended. Ryota was the first to lower the draught glass, and when all were lowered, Yui scouted the area around them. The nook of a room was partitioned with wooden dividers, each holding a bustle of patrons in a booth. Heads floated above the wooden dividers and lanterns hung from the ceiling where there was space. Despite the proximity, anonymity pervaded and diffused into the

rafters with all the departing worries of the floating heads of drinkers. Rika, Yui, and Ryota all waited for the other to speak to add their charge to the noise of the *izakaya* and say all those things that can't be said after a long absence.

Ryota resigned and turned his attention to the electronic menu. After scrolling for a second at the new specials, he ran his fingers through his fringe, which fell back into a wave above his chiselled features. He was tall. When he looked at you (which was not often), you couldn't help but feel disarmed, all words faltering as he locked his eyes with yours. He was devilishly charming without trying to be.

As a matter of fact, he consciously tried to avoid being so, but somehow always failed and won the affections of numerous crushes with that impenetrable stoicism. Yui remembered how the less subtle of the girls at their high school swooned as he walked passed to get his attention, puffing up their cheeks in anger when he took no notice of them. What they didn't know is that there were parts of the world Ryota had revoked.

As a boy, not much more than a toddler, while watching his father do his morning lengths, he fell into the public swimming pool dressed in his school uniform. Disappearing into the water knee-high white socks first, the disagreeable train-conductor's-looking-hat he wrestled on and off his head every morning floated on the surface as its wearer drowned.

Hearing the splash, his father stopped his pre-office training and lifted his son out of the water. Mr Mori, first full of rage and worry, descended into guilt and tried to pat his son down like a dropped coat. When he wouldn't wake, he cried out for the lifeguard, who pressed on Ryota's chest until he coughed out the water altering his lungs. For it did alter him, persuaded the branches of alveoli in him to hold water instead of

pockets of air.

He became obsessed with water as if he wanted to become the thing that almost killed him. And, with this obsession, a detachment that resulted in the obliviousness of the affections around him. He gave all of himself to swimming, to mastering the thing that killed a thousand different versions of the boy. The obsession diffused out into every part of him, and he lost all interest in the comings and goings of those things outside the watery stillness. Everything was too loud and full of colour.

Yui could never tell if he was disenchanted or enamoured with something she couldn't quite understand. She'd never lost herself in a craft or sport, simply drifted through the scenes of her life trying to make sense of it all. Waiting for Rika or Ryota to say something, she sipped her beer again and a memory poured itself in with the beer.

Her affections for him blossomed in the parts of her she knew little about. Walking home together after high school club activities, jazz band for Yui and, of course, swimming for Ryota, the Katabira river flowed privately for them, the water collapsing over itself in little waves here and there, foamy folds of dreamlike waters that looked a drifting blue sleep you could fall into. The river was a sketch of blue in a world of block buildings and cement that appeared to cover the earth in every direction. Nostalgic, somehow, it reminded them of villages they'd visited, of the dirt on their feet when they were children.

The falling light and pink cumulous clouds lapped at her eyelids and filled her with adoration for Ryota, always smiling but never more.

‘Should we go get some ice-cream?’

‘No, I am okay thanks.’

‘How about *jaggariko*, then? You can choose the flavour.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

Yui scoffed, looked again at the water, her school loafers, then pouted her lips.

‘Okay, then I’ll race you. From here to the bridge?’

‘I have to rest for training tomorrow morning.’

‘Okay.’ She searched for other ways to pull him out. Crows flew overhead. Yui wondered what they looked like from up there. ‘Would you fly if you could?’

‘No.’

An orb of frustration appeared in her.

‘What kind of non-human ability would you want, then. Gills?’

‘I don’t need anything more.’ Ryota closed his eyes with a smile.

‘How could you not need or want anything else?’

‘I have everything I need.’ Kicking his backpack up with his bum.

Frustration swelled in her, raising into her throat. ‘Race me.’ She punched his shoulder and got ready to take off.

‘My legs hurt, okay?’

A touch of resentment grew in her and collected in her eyes. ‘Why are you always like this? I am trying so hard to be your friend, to love you and learn about your silly, stupid brain and you just stand there with that annoying smile.’ Her words issued out of her louder than she expected. She stopped, released the tension in her limbs and then it all folded over into sadness.

‘Don’t you want more than just being underwater?’ He failed to answer. ‘You really did drown that day, didn’t you? I don’t understand. I don’t understand why you continue with this half existing.’

She ran off, and he watched her. Her silhouette disappearing under

the bridge. Minutes later he found her sitting with her knees up against her chest under a lamppost. She looked like she'd been waiting there for hundreds of years, timeless in the setting day.

'I'm sorry.' Yui didn't look at him, stood up and took his hand. They walked along the lit path, each lamp a lonely planet of light in the quiet dark.

'It's the only thing I know how to do.'

'What?'

'Existing. I don't know how to do anything else. I am just not here most of the time.'

'Where are you, then?'

They never spoke of it again and, looking at him now, you wouldn't suspect someone who revoked the world, who acted automatically, busied with other thoughts. He hadn't the time to plan or to hope. He measured out his existence by touching his fingertips on either side of the pool, reaching for something in the water, then turning around and restarting.

Yui tried to synthesize her idea of him and the reality. She tried to overwrite the memory of him with the image in front of her but found only other images permeating the topography of his body – memories and ghosts.

'You drink slow for a fish brother.' Rika had some foam on her lips.

Rika, on the other hand, did nothing but gobble up existence. A couple locks of hair curled down the sides of her face, but, for the most part, her short brown hair remained tied up behind her neck, sprouting out of the elastic like a lily. She reminded Yui of a cartoon character, cheeks stuffed with dumplings and a comical smile beneath her closed eyes

rushing about town for club meetings and various events.

Like her brother, she was adored in high school, but not for her abstrusity, rather for her goofiness, bouncing off walls with an animated elasticity – forever the clown for her audience, the leader of the daily activities just as she had been when Yui first met her. Rika adored being so, adored the applause and raucous laughter that seemed to nourish her and fill her belly with the warmth of freshly baked croissants. As a result, she had bundles of nervously written love letters, flowers, and chocolates, all bundled together for her on White day. She'd made Valentine's Day cupcakes for her class and did not expect to receive all these reciprocated gifts.

Perhaps they were just obligatory, but nonetheless, she'd blush on the walk home with packets of gifts and flowers that she threw beside her cello and basketball trainers. She never returned their affections, arranging the chocolates out on the dining room table. Ryota would sneak a chocolate before leaving for training, and another when he returned home late in the evening. Mr. Mori, however, was far less discreet and would munch a handful down after his evening's television viewings. When morning came, her mother would smile at the nightly feast and clear the chocolate wrappings to make room for her delicious breakfasts.

The fool and the fish. This was how Yui remembered the curious devils sitting across from her before time played its part and made them too, perfectly unknowable – the neighbours with their distant little world. Some nights in her grandmother's box house, she ached to be someone else, to disappear altogether and wake as another person. She'd quietly sneak out of bed and sit at her window, watching the shapes and silhouettes of the Mori household busying about behind lamplit curtains,

imagining what it might be like to be something different, to be nothing, like Ryota, or to be everything, like Rika.

They jested and joked and teased and drank.

Yui let out an ugly, guttural moan as she hoofed down the *tsukune* the fast-forward waiter had dropped off as he darted past. ‘I really missed Japanese food.’ She cleaned the skewer in seconds and took another.

‘Irish food no good?’ Rika enquired.

Yui just shook her head as the juices of the cheese and chicken covered her tongue.

None of them had been drinkers, but the 3-year absence had drawn from them a strange want for nostalgia and forgetfulness. They gave in to their bodies and a draught became many as faces flushed and the odd sensation of falling through the room dropped them into intoxication. Rika was first to find it’s madness as she gulped down her beers and highballs in a couple of mouthfuls with an avidity the others had not seen before.

Next was Yui, who half blushed and flushed felt her inhibitions fall away. Trailing in the back was Ryota who, though with clouds of beer in his skull, gave little visible clue to his intoxication. He did, however, withdraw from his introspection as the beer flowed, losing his attention to some odd idiosyncrasy of the people around him half as often as normal.

‘What are you going to do now that you’re back?’ Rika asked. Ryota jolting a lighter to a new cigarette.

‘What is there for me to do?’

‘Could keep translating. Profitable, I think.’

‘I suppose I could. I am staying with my grandmother again. So, I need to make sure I am no trouble. And that I can buy her cakes on the weekends. I’ll help her manage the gallery; I think.’ Yui’s cheeks flushed

with intoxication.

‘I could ask the staff at the conversation school I go to.’ Ryota offered from his marble lips.

‘You are learning English?’ Yui squinted her face.

‘I asked him if he knew he can’t speak underwater.’ Rika teased a disapproving Ryota who couldn’t hold back a smile.

‘I was asked by the production company, to deal with international crew and actors.’ Inhaling then tapping his lip.

‘I’ll also ask at the travel agency, Yui. They’d love you and working with you would be the best.’

‘The two of you still like to look after me, hey?’

‘Always.’ Rika beamed. She grabbed the arm of the accelerated waiter and ordered another round. A little surprised at her appetite for drunkenness, Yui examined her glass and looked up at the floating heads in the other booths. Some were pallid, exhausted with black circles around the eyes, others were as red as *tengu*, plotting their evening’s mischievousness, parts of them escaping their bodies in silvery diffusions. The lanterns, fragrance of grilled meats, and hum of laughter and conversation seemed to pull at the membrane of reality, as the *izakaya* transitioned between worlds.

‘Oh, I forgot to show you.’ Rika presented her phone with sets of gorgeous photographs boxed on her screen. Some of strangers Yui didn’t recognize, others of the city Yui did, but most were aesthetic captures of passed out businesspeople, drunk and left to sleep in the weirdest locations and positions. ‘What do you think?’ Yui scrolled through them, Ryota looking down over her shoulder as she passed through the images.

‘Rika, these are beautiful. When did you start all this?’

‘I needed something to do while you were gone. I’m still learning.’ Rika passed on the newly arrived drinks then rested her hands under her chin in anticipation of more questions. ‘It’s just a hobby.’

Of all the images, one made a lasting impression on Yui, the only she could remember in any detail. It was of a foreigner, European perhaps, Yui guessed Swedish or French. His blonde, cut features were framed under a railway bridge that made him look insignificant under the aspect of the city. The colours were a dull grey faded by an overcast lighting and the blacks of the metals struts that crossed under the bridge. The boy, or man, Yui wasn’t sure which, looked off to the right of the image as the wind lifted the loose-fitting clothing that hung off of him like banners off a lamppost. She couldn’t tell what she admired about the image, perhaps the ethereality of it, or the androgyny of the boy, the prettiness of how he bent his body to the wind.

‘Who is this?’

‘Léo, handsome right?’ Rika jiggled her shoulders in excitement.

‘Un, definitely.’

‘If you ask me nicely, I’ll introduce you.’

‘Stop.’ Yui looked up at her friend’s cheeky smile with feigned anger.

‘If you are free next week, could I photograph you?’

‘I am not a model.’

‘It’ll be fun, silly. Think of it as a coming home present for me.’

‘But *I* am the one that returned? How is being uncomfortable in front of a camera a gift?’ Yui looked up at her friend with a cheeky smile.

‘Léo?’ Rika bounced her eyebrows.

‘You’ll have to offer something else.’

Ryota sighed and downed the remainder of his highball before turning to the new one.

‘I’d ask you, brother, but I don’t have a waterproof camera just yet.’

Ryota imitated the sounds of bubbles.

‘Idiot.’ She leaned onto his shoulder affectionately.

Yui gave the phone to her friend and lifted her glass to theirs before taking a bit of the beer into her mouth. Her body protested and she resigned to drinking the glass slowly.

‘Please, Yui.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

They split the bill. Rika dropped some coins in a drunken daze as she fiddled through her wallet for the perfect amount of cash, slapping her forehead in a joking manner before picking them up and placing them in the tray. The accelerated waiter vibrated in place as he waited for their cash, taking little to no notice of them, eyeing other thirsty and loud customers. Ryota, of course, presented the exact amount of money as though he had predicted the cost and prepared the cash beforehand, pulling it out of his pocket without so much as looking down. What an odd creature, Yui thought to herself, unaware that she was squinting at him drunk and dazed.

The elevator tossed them out into the street. A wash of light and ambient noise flooded them, and they all took a moment to get their footing, looking around at the surgical masks, suits, and strangers stumbling about, chatting with flushed faces and impatient eyes, some so bold as to leave their masks lowered beneath their chin, exposing teeth of various shapes and shades. *Tengu* emerged from taverns and *izakayas*, drunk with all the happiness of forgetting.

‘The devil is out tonight’ Ryota joked, as a drunken man mumbling something to himself floundered passed in no particular direction.

‘Look at you Ryota, making jokes. You must be drunk.’ Rika teased her brother. ‘Let’s go for another drink?’ Rika suggested standing at attention like a soldier trying to hide their drunkenness.

‘I can’t drink another sip. I think I’d rather gouge my eye out with a wooden spoon.’

‘Eww’ Rika looked at her brother with disgust and the whole night seemed to pause and go silent for a second in shock of what he said. Ryota imitated the action and made a wet, splooping noise that sounded like the guts of a fish dropping on the floor.

‘You’ll join me, won’t you Yui?’

Yui did a quick check of her body. A little dizzy, tummy a little nauseous but nothing unbearable, warmth in the chest. The interminable need to pee. Definitely drunk. The little voice of logic in her brain said: go home, but that other parts of her coerced her: another drink couldn’t hurt, could it? She decided to put the latter hypothesis to the test.

‘Yeah, alright.’ She turned to Ryota and was crushed by the look he gave her. Ryota took a step closer to her as though to hug her, but changed his mind, awkwardly placing his hand on her shoulder.

‘I’ll see you again later this week, then?’

‘Un’.

Ryota took his leave.

It was no later than 10 in the evening when the two girls arrived back in Yokohama, a cool Autumn night made cosier by the hug of alcohol that carried the two girls through the city. They stopped at a convenience store to pick up a travel drink, arguing about which drink was better the

way they used to argue about music groups. They chose these horrid cans of *chuhi* that read 9% and were decorated with a smiling and chubby demon mask beside a plump lemon. They returned to the alleys of the coastal city, cracked their cans, and the strong tang of lemon mixed with the faint smell of salt in the air. The first sip sent shivers down their bodies, from the nose to the toes, and they winced.

‘How often do you see Ryota?’

‘Not much these days. He’s such a bore. We have nothing to talk about and without you there it’s impossible not to feel insane when you’re with him.’

‘Some things never change, hey?’

‘Yeah some things.’

‘Just us?’

‘Just us. And everything else.’ She covered her embarrassment with a sip of that lemony poison and cringed a little, laughing.

Yui looked at her friend and watched sorrow reveal itself; the thoughtful stare, the tapping of her finger against the demon’s chubby face; and, all at once, the colours of the city transformed; how, Yui wasn’t quite sure, but the flashing lights and neon glow surged with a new intensity and then dimmed, like the slowing pulse of the girl walking beside her.

‘What was it like over there?’

‘Gosh, it’s difficult to explain. It’s just another city, I guess.’

Rika gave Yui an exaggerated unimpressed glance.

‘I can’t explain it. But, now that I am back, it feels like none of it really happened, like someone else’s dream that you just, watched; like you were peeking into another world altogether and then, before you know

it, you're awake, in the same old city, under the same sheets and blankets, walking the same path to the same train station. But ... somehow, everything feels strange. And then you're not sure which place and which you were the dream.'

'Not a very pretty dream, this.' Rika gestured to the city with her eyes.

'You're here.'

Rika made a goofy face and took another sip. 'Let's keep dreaming then.'

'I'd love to.'

'Just don't forget me when you wake up.' Yui wasn't quite sure what she meant.

She had read of the strangeness of returning home but would never have imagined it to be this tangible. She felt she could reach out and almost touch it. It was there in Rika's quirks and jokes, and the texture of her voice, dusted over her coat, and the dress that dangled underneath it.

Everything was a fraction out of place and Yui could not help but feel a disjuncture in it all, perforations in a black firmament from which a viscous liquid fell in drops and covered the surface of her world. Yui looked up at the starless sky, its neon frame. The wind howled between the towering buildings and rushed through her and Rika.

'I was thinking, I'd like to take you there one day, to Dublin. We'd have so much fun. And, in a way, I think you visiting there with me would make it feel more real. I could show you where I walked, where I felt all the things I felt, and then they'd be real, right?'

'I'm free tomorrow.' There was a type of affection in her voice that Yui had not heard in Dublin, she wanted to hug her friend and never let go.

‘I have an idea.’ Rika lifted her can and downed the remainder of her drink, raised her eyebrows, stuck her tongue in revolt and shook her head overwhelmed by the lemony shock that rushed to her brain. She skipped forward, disposed of her can in the bin beside a vending machine, lifted her mask over her mouth, looked back at her friend.

‘Hurry up, before the dream ends.’ She winked before rushing off down the street.

Yui stood in shock for a fraction of a second, then downed her drink, trembled too at the electric taste and took off after Rika. The alcohol rushed straight to her head, detaching her thoughts from her body like muscles off a bone. Her body felt unreal, like a borrowed thing not entirely her own. She was without a doubt quite drunk as she followed the blurred silhouette of her friend.

‘Rika, wait! Where are you going?’

Yui turned the corner to a busy street and dodged the other creatures and archetypes of the Tokyo night, the city flashing passed her in a haze of colour and indistinct faces. Around her the world seemed to take on a strange aspect, as though something lifted the wallpaper off the city, exposing the red sweating faces of intoxication and the faults in the crumbling architecture around her.

Though a little ugly, it was somehow perfect, somehow more unreal than she remembered. Her body disappeared beneath her as she moved like a will-o-wisp through crowds of people. Rika waited for a second, turned back to make sure Yui was following and when she saw the flutter of Yui’s coat, bounced a little:

‘Hurry up, Yu-chan!’

‘Wait up! What are you doing?’

Yui could feel her heart pound in her chest and for some silly reason started laughing at herself.

‘Ah, I am so sorry!’ She rotated and called out, apologizing to a doddering old lady who cursed the drunken girl as she ran passed and gave her quite a fright. Yui blushed and tried to compose herself then searched the street for her friend, slowing to a walk before spotting Rika with raised arms. She restarted her anxious jog.

Rika had led Yui through a park and out to some of the harbour piers. There was no one around and Rika finally came to a stop at the end of a pier that floated out over the harbour waters. A series of lamps lit the pier and Yui saw her friend out in the distance, aglow in a fog.

‘Wait Rika, where are you taking me?’ Yui stopped to catch her breath. Sounds of the lapping water heaving against the harbour called to her. She looked up to see the snowy petals of a tree above her, glimmering in the haze of drunkenness like proxy stars in a starless city as the salty air flooded her lungs. She exhaled – and remembered home.

Out over the bay, constellations of lit offices and boats drifted as though through some devouring emptiness. Rika didn’t look back, she hardly moved at all save for the ripples of her white dress in the ocean wind. She seemed to forget the world standing there within the fog of the pier light, and looked almost translucent, like a paper lantern left in the emptiness of an abandoned harbour with no company but the sounds of the waves and the amorphous reflections of the city on the water’s surface.

You couldn’t help but feel that she carried the weight of loneliness in her, in every word and desperate laugh that rang out in the alleyways of Tokyo.

‘Do you see that?’ Rika pointed across the bay. ‘We can dream there.’

If you are there, you never wake. You dream forever.’

Yui caught up to her.

‘Maybe, if we lay under a tree in those gardens, and let the leaves cover our sleep, we could dream and forget the city around us.’ She looked at Yui. ‘Let’s go dream there together.’

‘I think *Sankeien* Gardens is closed, Rika, what are you talking about? How would we even get there from here?’

Yui looked about the pier, following the salt white ropes from their moorings to boats and dinghies. When she looked back at her friend, Rika had removed her jacket and lifted the straps of her dress off her shoulders.

‘What are you doing?’

Rika didn’t answer. Her dress fell to the wooden pier around her sneakers, and she kneeled to undo the laces.

‘Rika, what are you doing? Are you mad?’

Her translucency doubled, the blue of her veins now apparent underneath the white light of the pier. Air moved through her and out into the terrible emptiness in front of her. The tide splashed water on her toes and the cold climbed up her delicately protruding bones. Then the girl, mad with the want to dream, dove into the water, leaving her dress and sneakers on the pier.

Yui could not process what she had just seen and looked on at the empty pier and the circle of Rika’s dress without comprehending her disappearance into the water, her head still cloudy with intoxication.

Then her heart accelerated, and the cloud of alcohol evaporated in her skull as she toed Rika’s dress half expecting to find her hiding in the folds. The water went still. Seconds passed, perhaps a minute, she could not be sure, and the harsh electricity of worry tensed in Yui’s chest. She

called out to her friend, but her voice bounced off the surface of the water and waned across the bay. She waited and called again but was answered only by the bellow of a ships horn somewhere in the distance.

She undressed to her underwear as her friend had done. With each item of clothing coming off her, her anxiety doubled, her lungs compressed, and when she was ready to enter the water, she felt vulnerable and afraid. The jetty was empty, and there was no one about. But still she felt afraid. As if being touched by something unfamiliar, her body distorted before all that ebbing darkness and the reflections of a city that no longer recognized her. This was the last thing Yui thought before she curled her toes around the edge of the pier, bent her knees and jumped into the water.

The cold arrested her, dispossessed her of her thoughts for a second. Then, she tried to make out shapes and forms in the darkness of the water and strained her eyes under the lights of the city that fell into the water as thin luminous blades. Colour was all but absent and Yui found herself in a cold black and light world. She floated there a second and then kicked forward, reaching out and pulling herself through the water that flowed around her, wrapping her limbs in the cold. To her surprise, she could not see the ocean floor, but she was no more than a meter or two submerged in the water. Light traced over the skin of her legs as she kicked forward and turned her body in the water.

She turned her body almost 360 degrees and to her surprise found a curious globular thing floating in front of her just within her reach. A trick of the water. Her eyes adjusted to the new angles of darkness and light and she continued her search for Rika. When she came about again, the blurry image in the water was still there and she waited for it to come into focus. Its silhouette coalesced, glued together and, alone, a jellyfish floated an

arm's length away. She exhaled little bubbles from her nose that tickled her cheeks and bumped into each other on their way to the water's surface as she watched the jellyfish drift aimlessly.

Yui held as still as she could. It did not move at all, and for a second, she thought it was dead, but it jolted back to life as it kicked out its umbrella body to maintain its position and then resumed a static float. It was neither luminous, nor purple, nor curious. It was just a globular mass, a floating blob half swallowed up by the darkness. *What are you doing here?* There was no electricity in it, nothing that betrayed any hint that it was aware of Yui. Without thinking, she reached out. Poisonous. She wanted its poison.

Her finger's reached out in the liquid dark, wanting to know, when Rika's arms wrapped around her waist and the warmth of her skin touched Yui's back. She dropped her hands to Rika's arms, lifted them off her and turned in her hug to find her friend, bubbles exploding from her mouth and nose. She grabbed Rika's cheeks and smiled at her friend, and the two of them kicked to the surface, cut into fragments by the lines of light that fell from the city.

They surfaced and Rika immediately jumped on Yui in the water, hugging her. When the water settled and cleared off their quivering eyelashes, Rika looked at Yui with desperation.

'Don't leave me again.'

-

They pulled themselves up onto the pier. The cold water squeezed their toes and obstructed their lungs. Yui gathered her hair over her right shoulder and squeezed the water out, looking angrily at Rika to her left.

‘It’s freezing Rika.’

‘Don’t worry, I just texted Ryota, he said he’ll bring us some towels.’

Rika tucked her phone back into the folding of her dress behind her.

They waited for their emotions to subside, trembling on the pier together, their toes tucked under their thighs for warmth.

‘Do you remember the little stream on the way home?’

Yui turned to Rika who left her gaze on the shifting waters.

‘How we used to put our coins together and buy some Jambo ice-creams and eat them under the bridge, watching those black koi wiggle around? I still don’t get how they made their way back up to that spot after June’s heavy rains. You used to break off a bit of the cone and drop it between them and watch to see who got to nibble it.’ Rika mirrored the action without taking her eyes off the horizon.

‘Yeah, and you kept telling me the sugar was bad for them.’

‘Did they have those ice-creams in London?’

‘I looked but couldn’t find any, maybe I was just looking in the wrong place.’

‘I think I’d die three years without them.’

The wind rushed between them and cut at the water so little breaks of white rolled over the waves near the pier. The city was somehow quieter than most nights and only the water heaved its tidal breath against the concrete walls that held it in.

‘I thought you’d always be here.’

Yui didn’t respond.

‘I always imagined we’d do everything together, like we used to. I thought we’d study together and pull all-nighters in the library, have our first drunken night together, cuddle nights with movies and plushies, and a

ridiculous number of snacks. I thought I'd watch you fall in love, and you'd try to introduce me to their friends, and we could double date, or be there for each when they left us and scream and shout and cry and laugh together.'

Rika smiled her goofy smile at Yui then sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. She lifted herself onto her palms and shuffled closer to Yui so that their shoulders and arms were touching.

'It's cold.

A ship's horn issued its voice into the bay.

'I always pictured I'd be there at your wedding, and maybe you at mine, and no one would understand us like we understood each other. I'd look at you dancing, and know that you were finally happy, that you'd found the family you lost. And I'd tell everyone that you were my best friend, that we were family and did all those things together, that we had always been inseparable. Sometimes I even imagined our kids being friends and holding hands as they walked to school together. Silly right?'

'We can still do those things, Rika.'

'Can we?'

Chapter 2 - Stage

‘But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.’

‘In what, my dear lord?’

‘I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.’

Charlie studied Hamlet; a plump fellow with a sort of vacuous expression. He almost expected to catch a reflection of the stage lights in the bit of drool on his lips. With an air of absurdity, he bounced around the stage and the full measure of the theatre with a foolishness and haughty disdain that deliberately insulted everyone looking on. The audience turned their heads synchronously, becoming robotic figures charmed by the vulgarity of the actor, who climbed over chairs, touched audience members’ arms and sprawled over the theatre stairs in a sort of Dionysian fugue.

‘Couple yennies says he falls.’ Tagg whispered.

‘With hooves like those, never, you’re on.’

The troupe was a handful of Shakespeare obsessed foreigners touring Japan. They performed barefoot and on an empty stage, rehearsing on the train the night before the next performance as they moved from city to city. A single prop distinguished character from character as the actors changed where necessary, save for Hamlet, who never shifted character and carried no prop, emptying himself of words across the theatre.

Hamlet’s swollen, hairy toes disturbed Charlie, and though he wanted to win the wager, a part of him wished he would fall, and tear open a lip on the account of the fact that he exposed his feet so publicly. He hated feet and liked to entertain dark thoughts such as these. Hamlet

leaped back onto the stage then broke in sarcastically:

‘My lord I have news to tell you: when Roscius was an actor in Rome – ‘

‘The actors are come hither my lord.’

‘Buzz, buzz.’

‘Upon my honour – ‘

‘Then come each actor on his ass.’

The greyer, bespectacled members of the Japanese audience let out a series of laughing exhalations, heaving out their nostrils without so much as a smile. Seriousness pervaded the Meiji university theatre, save for Charlie and Tagg who found themselves there almost by accident. Charlie caught himself watching the audience more than the performance.

‘What are you looking at?’ Below her breath again.

‘Bit of a goblin, this hamlet of ours.’

She kicked him with the side of her boot. He overdramatically squirmed the muscles in his face, and Tagg resisted a giggle by squeezing her lips together.

‘Laertes saw that, they’re going to kick us out.’ Charlie jested.

‘Then you’d have me all to yourself?’

A disgruntled wheeze issued behind them. They resumed a show of interest that lasted all of 10 minutes before Charlie tried to wrestle Tagg’s elbow with his own for the arm rest. She resisted; both his pointy elbow and the urge to laugh – this performance of theirs adding to the unreality of the evening. The wheeze behind them became a scoff and the theatre’s performances continued.

Tagg was there on invitation from her friend who was a student at the university hosting the performance, and Charlie, a guest of Tagg’s.

They took to trying to make the other laugh and approached the evening with a rather comedic, self-reflexivity that mocked the pretentiousness of it all without fully undermining the beauty of the words. It was all half a joke to them, and half a means to reconnect after the seven years they had not seen each other. Perhaps reconnect was not the word. They were never close, never anything more than strangers with a curiosity for the other that never learned anything more than a crawl.

Charlie found it hard to learn anything about her, she was always throwing up disguises or opinions he suspected were not her own. She looked like someone in a film, a character who was always leaving, always trying to be something else, someone who was unsure of how to love or recognize it in others. There was something elven about her, the shape of her, the delicate pointiness perhaps, the ends of her fingers or the curiousness she tried to hide in indifference.

This semi-stranger next to him, who smiled into her cheeks with glasses resting on them and who had hair that seemed to lighten or darken with her expressions, was affectionately called Tagg, her surname. She preferred how it sounded over Alyssa, which she decided at 6 was a name for a flower and not a wrestler.

When they were teenagers, they orbited one another. Some nights they came close and others, stole quiet glances from across the room, unable to quite place a finger on what it was that kept them apart. ‘He is laughing with his friends, I can’t go now.’, was the answer she offered Vi, a black-haired girl in boots with snakebite lip rings and freckles under her eyes, when asked why she wouldn’t go talk to him.

Though in different high schools, they both belonged to that curious group of teenagers that snuck out to dingy bars swollen with sound and

cigarette smoke, where local bands dragged their cables and chords onto stages and drowned out all the thoughts that had nothing to do with intoxication, sex, or suffering. When the music raged, everything outside of those grimy pubs ceased to exist and the underage audience drank and dreamed their weekends away. *How filthy and charming it all was*, Charlie thought.

After the play had ended, groups of various kinds formed in the lobby of the Meiji University theatre, as the audience hummed with opinions and comments. Some lingered a moment or two, others dispersed through the glass doors into the city, lit with the pink hues of fading light lit clouds.

‘We are all getting some dinner and drinks after this. Some of the cast will be there. You are welcome to join us.’ Yuki offered.

‘The cast?’

‘Yuki is dating Laertes.’ Tagg answered Charlie. Yuki melted into her jumper.

Before Charlie could answer, Tagg declined the offer and added, ‘I have to find out what this devil has been doing the last seven years. We are going to a Basquiat exhibition tonight. Plus, he needs me to help find a gallery for his paintings. He needs my charm, lacking his own.’ She nudged him.

‘Yes, I am a boorish oaf really.’ Charlie smiled dumbly.

‘See what I mean.’ The sarcasm didn’t land with Yuki, but Charlie liked it. The group ambled off and Laertes ran in from the side, lifting Yuki off her feet for a hug. They disappeared into the city.

-

‘We’d be a lot more successful here if you were a musician instead of a painter, I think that’s the sixth guitar store we’ve passed.’

Ochanomizu measured itself by the fall of commuters’ shoes. There was little to hear save for the passage of businessfolk that ticked on like a metronome. And what other noise there was came from the guitar stores in muted notes of embarrassed voices asking about the timbres and prices of the instruments hanging on the walls, but never trying them. They’d nod at the tanglewood of a midrange Yamaha and, unable to swallow their doubt, leave the store without buying anything, filing into the anonymous traffic of people.

To the north of *Ochanomizu* station, a vein of foliage and water cut itself into the concrete mass of the city, a refuge for ducks and the disillusioned eyes of train passengers that could catch a glimpse of it as the train exited a tunnel then buried itself into the underground struts again. The image did not linger, but an unidentifiable nostalgia did. And when you felt it, any dreams of wanting to learn the guitar become a little lighter, and a little less important.

‘Any idea where to start? I don’t remember seeing any galleries at all.’

‘Google sensei says there’s one somewhere around here.’

Charlie dragged a map around on his phone. The neat lines of the Tokyo grid were pleasing to the eye, though not as easy to navigate as he would’ve liked. Tokyo always looked as though it were easy to understand, but, looking up at the buildings around them, the city defied all definition.

‘Do you have photographs of the paintings on your phone?’

‘I do, but I have some printouts so they can keep them.’ He

continued to examine the map on his phone.

‘Can I see them?’

‘If you ask nicely.’ He walked off in the direction of the blue line on his screen. ‘Don’t want you to fall in love with me when you see them.’ He adjusted a fake collar and cleared his throat like an imaginary gentleman.

‘So you *are* trying to seduce me. Let’s hope the paintings aren’t as transparent as you are.’ Then she looked away, as if losing interest.

Frames Ochanomizu, just around the corner from the station, looked a modern partition of glass attached to a tower of apartments. When the glass doors closed behind them, the sound of passing trains was dimmed, and a cosy quietness fell over Charlie and Tagg.

The greying gentleman slumped over the reception desk shot up and welcomed the new guests with an exaggerated smile. Behind him, pinned on a cork board were scribbles and crayon doodles, no doubt those of a daughter or son, who, like their father, perhaps took to images and drawing early. Charlie nodded to the gentleman then turned to find Tagg already looking through the paintings and sculptures made of everyday objects around the room.

Quite the array of things made up some of the sculptures; screws, bolts, hammers, tools to break and tools to put things back together. Tagg wanted to touch the sculpture of an anguished looking face, but retreated because the surface of it looked as if it might cut her. Charlie caught up to her.

‘Do you ever sometimes wish you could build things? Throw all these bits together to make something?’

Charlie thought of the parts of her, all those unknowable fragments that pieced together the girl in front of him. If he could open her up

unfasten the bones in her chest and look in, what would he find? Unsure really of what he was looking for, perhaps there would be something in her he wanted, something in the porcelain ends of her body, the sadness in her expression she failed to hide when she thought he wasn't looking.

‘Like what?’

‘I'd love a Rube Goldberg machine somewhere in the house, to do something silly like an alarm attached to a kettle that would prepare coffee for me. It would be at the perfect drinking temperature as the alarm went off.’

‘Would it have a tea option for me?’

‘Meh, maybe. I'd double the price though. Tea tax.’ Tagg tried to imagine the objects of the sculpture separate from the whole but found it a little difficult. ‘It sometimes feels weird to me that everything is made of little pieces of stuff.’

‘Is everything okay? Can I help you with something?’ For a second, Charlie mistook the greying gentleman for one of the art pieces. The clerk bumped the sculpture of a disfigured, almost fraying body maid of wax, and he had to catch both it and his own balance, going red, before returning his attention to his guests. Charlie did his best to respond to his polite and precise Japanese with his own.

‘Yes, excuse me. I am an artist, and I am looking for a gallery for my paintings. Could I show you what I have?’

A vague searching expression, the clerk looked up, falling through all the ways he could respond to the foreigner in front of him, trying to find a way to refuse amiably. Charlie could read the decline, recognizing the signs of it.

‘Please wait a moment.’ And he darted off up the stairs near the

entrance.

Tagg was already at the end of the room, looking at a glass cabinet of acrylic paints with prices on them, running her fingers over the names of tubes of paint. Charlie tried to quieten the steps of his sneakers against the wooden flooring, the gallery all but empty now save for them.

‘Do you use any of these?’ Carmine, Phtalo blue. Mars Black.

‘There are so many.’

‘Sometimes. Though I can never remember the names.’

Burnt Sienna, Cerulean, Sap Green.

‘Where’d the guy go?’

‘Upstairs. To talk to someone or look for an excuse in a box.’

Tagg squeezed some of the paint in the tube, moving it from one end to the other.

‘Do you ever paint people?’

Portraits came to mind; sketches; lessons on facial structure; how he always struggled with the eyes, all the drawings he tried to imitate, and then those he tried alone; the collarbones and sweat of an acquaintance from a rugby club, the knuckles of a stranger. Charlie liked the places where things connected, and where they could be broken.

‘Sometimes.’

‘Would you paint me?’

‘*I am so sorry.*’ The clerk returned looking despondent. ‘*Could you please show me what you’d like us to display?*’

‘*Of course.*’ Charlie lifted folded cards from his pocket and showed them to the clerk. But he didn’t look at them, he just took them with both hands, bowing, and disappearing back upstairs. 10 minutes passed. Visitors came and went, looking at the industrial art with boredom. An occasional

drop of something heavy could be heard from upstairs, things being dragged, boxes perhaps. Then the clerk returned with beads of sweat on his forehead, this time slowly, visibly, from the other end of the gallery, down passed a body of glass filled with metal swarf.

'I am so sorry, but we cannot display your paintings. Thank you very much.' He spoke with a practiced remorse.

'Why?' Charlie asked flatly.

The clerk hesitated, then spat out a fumbling of reasons nervously that Charlie couldn't understand. It was all too fast and full of formal structures above his Japanese ability.

'What did he say?'

'I have no idea.' Charlie smiled, receiving the copies of his paintings back from the apologetic figure of the man, but keeping them in sight, between them. *'Please. Can it not be done? I need this.'*

The sadness in Charlie's voice caught Tagg off guard. The vulnerability was quite a contrast to their day of sarcasm and joking about. He really wanted this. She couldn't remember ever seeing him want anything and could only remember him looking disinterested in the world around him. But things change in seven years.

The next flurry of Japanese from the clerk was even harder to follow, months too advanced for Charlie's barely conversational Japanese. The clerk apologized a couple of times then rushed off again. Charlie held the copies of his paintings as if they were dirty and turned to Tagg, who couldn't resist laughing at his confused, almost dumbfounded expression before ambling off to look at more of the art, more to escape the discomfort. When the clerk returned, he presented Charlie with some acrylic paint.

'There really is no excuse. I am sorry, please accept this as a gift' He bowed apologetically.

'That's okay, I don't need this thank you.'

'Please.'

'No, really, it's okay.'

The clerk bowed deeper. A rush of embarrassment flooded Charlie; embarrassment quickly perforated with annoyance. Another absurd transaction in this absurd city he adored. Searching for some escape from the awkwardness, he looked over the shoulder of the clerk at Tagg, who was examining the glass body of metal swarf just off the staircase the clerk ran up and down. All she could offer was a shrug of resignation. Lost on what to do, Charlie opened his wallet and leafed through the notes.

'No no, please, it is a gift.'

'I want to pay.'

More complicated Japanese followed, stubbornness forcing itself off his words. *Was this genuine kindness, or did the clerk just want him to leave, to save himself the tense burden of this foreigner asking for things he could not understand.* His Japanese exhausted, Charlie was left with no choice but to accept the paint.

'Do you know where I can find a gallery to display my work?'

'It does not exist.' Another fast track of Japanese come from the clerk, recognizable words falling out of his mouth like stones in the bucket of Charlie's ears. After some confirmation questions, a touch more miscommunication, and numerous apologies and thank you's, Charlie noted down the gallery the clerk thought might accept his paintings – if it did exist. *Gallerie 412, Shibuya.*

The glass doors opened and the two of them walked into the sounds

of the city.

‘Shibuya, then?’

Charlie nodded. ‘Please and thank you.’ The silly playfulness she adored found its way back into his expressions, but there was a seriousness there too, disguised in the lines of his face.

‘How long have you been trying to find a gallery.’

‘I don’t know. A year, maybe more.’

‘Can I see them?’

Charlie removed the folded cards again, this time a little bent from the interaction. Tagg leafed through them, leafed through him, and realised Charlie changed. The paintings betrayed some parts of him she remembered, though she couldn’t say how, the vampiric quality of the figures perhaps, the vague sadness in the muted tones. She liked them but didn’t know what to say.

‘I think he liked you, that clerk.’ Tagg teased. ‘What colour did he give you?’

Charlie took the acrylic from his pocket and placed it in Tagg’s hand. Neutral Grey.

-

Business suits, surgical masks, and misted glasses entered the carriage of the Chūō Line. Crows watched the bodies enter and exit the metal hull from the powerlines overhead. The passengers were older, the aged and fat of corporations less pressured to remain and work overtime in the dull grey mass of towers that thorned the horizon; buildings of lit windows, greyed out by the glass that housed the fatigued, bruised eyes of those locked in the scrutiny of others. The neon ligaments of Tokyo started

to glow, revealing what the day couldn't. And those rooms became less visible, fogged in the colour.

Charlie and Tagg stood across from one another, perpendicular to the electronic doors that opened and closed noiselessly at each station.

Tagg smiled out the corner of her mouth at Charlie. Tokyo breathed its breath of light. And that quiet ache was slowly revealed.

-

Shibuya. Things moved differently here. A different logic ordered this aperture of the planet, motion constant, pervasive. Screens of deathly light, rigged across buildings, showed advertisements of gossamer faces; chiselled jawlines of crystalline boys and the soft delicacy of an unreal beauty of girls who turned their cheeks and looked down on the interminable movement of little bodies, particles of existence who never looked up at their digital gods.

Tagg faked a kiss on Hachiko's cheek for good luck and Charlie observed the almost perverse Shibuya fashion that he found odd and gorgeous. Everything was in excess, the clothing was either inanely long, or deviously short, baggy to the point of dragging behind sneakers, or so tight as to outline all the contours of its wearer. The numerous faces around them were androgynous, amorphous, and full of secret thoughts, as they tried to imitate their digital gods in a flush of colour and cosmetics. Something in Charlie wanted to trade clothing with them, to dress as these liquid creatures and perform some version of himself, to dilute himself in the fictions of Shibuya.

'Stop staring, weirdo.' Tagg brought him back from over his shoulder, her lips near his cheek. 'Think I'd look good dressed like that?'

She posed and laughed.

They opened their maps and chose a route to the store the greying clerk recommended. Then, the hollow spaces between the cement and glass of buildings were filled with a synthetic voice. They didn't catch the words, but they were neither imperious, nor beautiful. They sounded, rather, like the pull of a needle into an empty syringe, a taking, like the slow theft of those distant things, those hidden things in everyone.

'I still can't tell if I hate those sounds or like them.'

'Nor I.' Charlie lifted his gaze to the grey edges of roofs.

The area around *Gallerie 412* was oddly quiet. As the distance display on the map reduced, so too did the number of people and the ambient noise of the 24-hour district. Tagg looked around her, checking the narrow walkways and alleys night poured out of, the fissures of the city.

Fear, the thick air of her hometown started to clot her thoughts. Nearing a dozen months out of Johannesburg, she'd half-forgotten the tepid fear that always gurgled in the back of the city's throat, like a mucus ready to be spat over you. But the odd absence of people reminded her of it.

'Do you think it's safe here?'

'Everything is safer than that villainous city of yours.'

She was still new to the freedom of Tokyo and the analgesic quality of its safety. She wanted to ask Charlie why he thought this part of Shibuya was so empty but chose instead to tease him and try to laugh herself back into the cosy anaesthetic of Tokyo. Digital voices reverberated off metal architecture in the distance.

The *Gallerie 412* sign doused everything in the street in its sharp

blue. Next to the entrance were three bodies, two against the wall with floating embers near their blue silhouettes, another squatting just in front of them. They had frog-like eyes blinking in an eerie asynchronicity. A cloud of sedation kept them hushed. There was no reaction to Charlie and Tagg's being there. They just blinked a disinterested numbness into the Shibuya night as the blue light of the *Gallerie 412* sign fell harshly over their amphibious faces.

Tagg, forever charming and curious, greeted them in Japanese. They nodded without turning their attention to her, as if instructed by a button, without speaking and then continued to inhale their little embers. Charlie noticed that their fingers were black, as though dipped in a dark black ink. It made it look like the cigarettes floated above their hands and when they exhaled, you could see nothing but the light scattered in the smoke and their creepy blinking, half in this world and half in another. If you looked at them long enough, the empty spaces in you made themselves known.

The squatting body shouted into the street. *Hurry up!* A fourth figure was coming down to them, the receiver of the coarse shout perhaps. Charlie hesitated, then entered the store behind Tagg.

'That was weird.' He bumped into Tagg's back.

'And this?' Tagg's eyes searched for something to make sense of what she was seeing.

The gallery was completely empty and none of the ceiling lights were on. The reception was abandoned, and the computer monitor offline. Tagg looked for some clue of normality in the emptiness. She could see globes of light in the back of the gallery, intermingling like a three-dimensional Venn diagram – white, a light blue, and a moody purple folded into the corners of the room. Charlie leaned over the reception

counter, expecting to find some balled up clerk hiding from something, but there was nothing there.

‘It smells like a hospital in here.’

‘Where things come to die.’ A dull resignation rippled out from his eyes. He lifted his chin to the empty gallery and tried to find his resolve in the ceiling. Tagg nudged him with her shoulder. ‘I’m sorry. Maybe the guys outside know another gallery around here. Want me to ask them for you?’

‘I don’t know. I am tired of this. This is the hundredth gallery I’ve tried.’

Charlie called out an imperious and frustrated *hello* that fell flat somewhere in the middle of the empty space and into the vague colours in the back. They waited a second, looked around awkwardly.

‘Maybe we should check the admissions cash register, just in case.’ She winked. The joke lifted the tension.

Resignation washed down Charlie’s spine. ‘Let’s go for a drink, we have an two hours to kill before the exhibition.’

Just as they turned to leave, the patter of rushed steps could be heard coming from the globes of light in the back. From the darkness a fat and diminished man shuffled out towards them, his elbows bent at his sides as though he couldn’t rest his forearms down the roundness of his body. A failed combover greeted Charlie and Tagg as the man neared the blue light of the entrance. He bowed. Caught his breath. Then lifted his middle finger to a black device in his throat and pressed it. His voice come out of the machine.

Charlie could make out nothing of what the mechanical voice was saying, it scratched at his ears and broke the rhythm of Japanese he was

accustomed to. Trying not to look, Charlie averted his eyes from the surgery lines in the man's throat and looked for a feature he could look at without staring; not the massive cartoonish nose, nor the three lines of hair spread over his head, nor the eyes to avoid embarrassment.

He settled for the frown lines on the forehead, then forgot all together why they were there, the linearity of his memory broken by the strangeness of the evening and the grating mechanical voice of the more mole than man stroking his chin in front of them.

'Excuse me, I am looking for the gallery manager.'

The mole breathed through his nose in frustration, then pressed the device in his throat to issue a response.

'I am so sorry; my Japanese is terrible. I don't understand.'

The mole repeated himself for a third time.

Charlie looked at Tagg with desperation and she offered her signature shrug. 'Told you we should've just emptied the register.'

'He is asking how you got here and asking you to please leave.' The voice was cool but aloof. It fell on them like drops off a tree after the end of a heavy rain. The foreigners hadn't heard the door open, nor the quiet steps of the man who entered; tall, distracted, a wave of black hair over strong eyebrows. Everything about him suggested gentleness, waiting for their response.

The mole touched the device in his neck again and addressed the newcomer, who had the body of an Olympic swimmer, in as quiet a voice the device could manage.

The stranger translated: 'the director is saying you cannot be on his set. He is confused. How did you get through the security barriers? He is asking me to please remove you from the set. Is that okay?'

The stranger's English was good, intermediate perhaps, with less of an accent than most in Tokyo. And, Charlie noticed, his fingers were black, like the fingers of the smokers outside.

What followed was a series of awkward apologies and a shuffling around before the three of them left and passed the amphibious and ashen bodies outside, who had not moved and continued to exhale their ghostly innards.

'I am sorry about that; the director is a difficult man. Ryota.' He bowed his head in introduction.

'He's Charlie and I'm Tagg.' with a closed, stretching smile.

The sounds of Shibuya fluctuated across the city of box buildings and reflections as they walked to the perimeter of the set they'd somehow missed.

'There was no barrier or anything when we came this way.' Charlie tried to excuse their actions, looking at their guide from time to time.

'The schedule said we would finish at 5, but the director is a focussed man. I bet the company in charge of the barriers left at that time.' The three sets of steps were slowly overridden with the growing surge of Shibuya and all its electrical appendages. Those loud, synthetic voices rang through them and dissipated unnoticed into the darkening alleys behind them.

'What were you filming?'

'I don't know to be honest. We were asked to wait outside.'

'Oh.' Tagg disguised a look of concern to Charlie who bit his lip to arrest a laugh. 'Sounds fun.'

'It is not.'

'We are sorry to have caused any trouble for you. Just a silly

accident.’

Tagg threw her arms over Charlie’s shoulders.

‘The only hint we had of it being a set was how empty everything was.’

‘We may look like rogues, but we aren’t.’

‘Then what are you?’ The oddness of Ryota’s words were like glass.

Tagg’s hands fell off Charlie’s shoulders.

-

The composition of hairy faces, spots, yellow lips, and lower eyelids like soot, reminded Charlie of some of the paintings he studied. There was something unmistakably ugly about them, something alarming, like an ominous hue of sorts that radiated off them with all their dumb teenage confidence. A dishonest lot on a roof in the western suburbs of Durban, they were part of the roof, immobile in the clearing of pines around them, but not quite marble. Less perfect, rougher.

Orangutan, gifted with the name on the account that he could touch his knees without bending, stood and broke the composition. He got up, walked to the edge of the roof, then fell off of it. The pool caught him in its green waters, and he floated there a second before getting out and lying on the grass.

Karp dragged on his cigarette. Without much effort, he kept the ash remnants of the cigarette unbroken. It hung off the filter, safe in the windless day of the humid, wretched coastal heat. Vetnek squinted his eyes, looking for something in the heatwaves above the tree line perhaps.

‘Orangutan, you wash away those tears there?’ Karp issued off the roof.

Hond rolled forward and, his hands in the gutter for balance, looked over the eaves. All that Orangutan could muster was a loud, guttural moan that communicated the pain of the intoxicants leaving his system in humid sweats and quick shocks of cold water. Returning from his daze, Vetnek shuffled to the gutters on his back like a crab, then kicked Hond off into the water.

‘Ludo, you look like you need a dip. Or a drip.’ Charlie’s nomenclature was given to him after the town he was from, Lüderitz, on the coast of Namibia and though technically the pronunciation was incorrect, the name made him feel a part of them, another element in their teeth, stubble, and ruddy sneakers that could gnaw away at the empty streets.

‘Think I need Jesus.’ Charlie lay back on the hot rooftiles and covered his eyes with his hands. ‘And a goth girl to sit on my face.’

‘I am sure Vetnek would do that for you if you asked.’ Karp bubbled out a jarring cackle.

‘Negative. I’ll crush his skull.’

They spoke almost in code. Their meaning was communicated, and any listener from outside their devilish group could follow with ease. But there was something hidden in the words, in a mesh of jests and jousts of wit, something left over; some tension of want in the wake of each sentence. Charlie felt they were never really honest with each other and held back those parts of them they feared would be mocked in defence of some other unriotous thought. It was a disenchanting revelry or nothing.

This was the language of boys, Charlie thought, a language of half-intimacies and performances, perhaps. The red-blooded chaos of their youth would soak into them and from their first days of friendship when

they were 14, to this day, and for a thousand days after, they would measure their love in their ability to make each other laugh and only much later, in their ability to make each other feel.

How could Charlie ever paint something so dirty with reality and so desperate with the loneliness of becoming men? This, another thing he kept hidden.

The early December heat started to burn the roof and the half-naked, hungover limbs stretched over the ceramic orange tiles. Before the day reached 10, they were all in the pool floating aimlessly and regaining the energy to tease and roughhouse. Orangutan launched a couple of assaults and was quickly lifted, turned, and dunked by Vetnek, and remained dunked by Karp until his ridiculous arms flailed about helplessly. Hond was glued to the dogs who sniffed excitedly at the edge of the pool and Charlie tried to find an avenue to perform his identity, but just ended up borrowing from the others.

The pine trees shook in the wind. Meat was cooked on a flame. Corn was burnt. And before long, beers were opened. A week of festivities to celebrate the end of high school and a gathering of their last raucous stories before they split for different universities. Charlie felt the ends of him disintegrate in the bitterness of beer, the sweetness of cane and crème soda. The others lost their borders in the fumes of alcohol. They fell into each other and then couldn't tell where they started, and where the others began, dissolving into a mass of laughter and red faces.

They had to hustle a ride from someone. Vetnek was nominated to acquire the transport, being a likeable brick of a lad and after just one call, they were picked up by a guy from a couple grades above them. A quiet, thoughtless type, he took Vetnek under his wing when he joined the firsts

rugby. They pushed each other into the beat-up corolla and filled the vehicle with the noise of the music they were into, *Underoath*, *Architects*, *Parkway Drive*, and a couple indie classics for Karp with his curly mop of hair and round lipped mouthing of the words.

Beers were again distributed. They drank and moved and tried not to spill beer as the car dipped and rose through the overgrown Durban hills. As they passed traffic lights, jumping a red or two, their raucousness doubled with each kick of the accelerator and after a 50-minute drive the sun and all sense had abandoned them. They got out the car, shoved each other with what could sometimes be called affection, save for Hond who always hung back, and left their empty bottles on the curb of the street, walking over them to the queues of bodies waiting outside *Museum*, a club with a name the owner thought more hilarious than it was.

‘Oof, there are some honeys in this queue.’

‘You couldn’t catch a honey if you stuck your dick in a beehive, Orangutan.’ Karp jested and mock punched him in the belly.

‘Negative boys, tonight’s the night we are tongue punching some fart-boxes. Spread ‘em and *soen* ‘em, lads.’ Orangutan demonstrated the technique and the others laughed.

The queue was laborious at best. Hond and Ludo devised tactics to talk to girls. Vetnek pushed his chest out, leading them in the queue. Karp and Orangutan continued to rile each other up. No one in the queue took much notice of them, each pocket of friends concerned with their own inside jokes and riotous dreams for the evening. The queue moved forward in little compartments of intoxication.

The boisterousness of Orangutan and Karp grabbed at the others and limbs moved about dumbly, pushing, and pulling at one another as though

in search of where they break easiest.

‘Ludo and Hond are no doubt going to try the poet’s approach to getting laid.’ Orangutan again.

‘Failing, having a cry, and writing a song about it.’ Karp joined in.

‘Tears are a good lube for a lonely crank.’ Ludo acted out the cry and wank motions.

Vetnek laughed with that contagious laugh of his, but Hond only managed a snigger. Orangutan made to grab the imaginary penis and Ludo reversed his hips, then stumbled backwards out of the vague logic of the *Museum* queue, tripping over nothing in particular. Looking up in preparation for a following onslaught, Ludo suppressed a blush and looked away. Down the queue, maybe 5 or 6 groups down, Charlie saw Tagg. Frozen for a second, he moved back into their space in the line and looked down at his black sneakers.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Vetnek’s expression was half concerned and half ready to humiliate.

‘Tagg is here.’

‘No, no, no, no, Ludo.’ Karp put his arm around his shoulders and turned him in the direction of the queue. ‘Look at the bums on that one dude, and the legs on her. Let us, as gentleman and scholars, study the forms of strangers.’

Vetnek, joining in on the ridiculous turns of phrase, ‘Let us not regress to the forms of would-be-maybe lovers and muse rather on the nips of sloots.’

Orangutan, facing the boys, reversed into the group ahead of them. ‘Quite so, gentleman. Behold, a distraction.’ And proceeded to talk to a girl and her 3 friends just in front of them. The others had little time to process

the start of the conversation. Blushes were exchanged, with jokes and compliments, and silly nonsensical comments about music, drinking, and the smell of the coast that washed over the club into the street.

The noise of the doors drew them nearer. It sounded horrid and delicious, full of ungodly creatures waiting to be undressed and undone, saliva pooling in their lips. Tickets to the *Museum* were purchased. VIP, a gift from Vetnek's father and they went in with their new acquaintances.

The name made a touch more sense when they were inside; their first time here as none of them were locals to this part of the damned country. The peripheries of the club were decorated with various mannequins and paintings and did resemble something of a *Museum*. The mannequins were positioned in various poses as though they were all jointed drawing models posing for an artist trying to imitate a temper of sorts, to find in it the basic shapes of the body.

They were distorted, disfigured almost. Parts of dissimilar mannequins were glued together, or added to another in grotesque ways, extra arms, double eyeless heads. They looked as though a body were trying to climb out of some dark matter and there was something terribly desperate about them, something unsettling.

The paintings did nothing to ease the feeling. Hardly lit and with diminished subjects, the canvases looked like white windows with something insignificant in the distance. Charlie thought that, even standing close to the painting, something about it would still feel so far away, like a memory.

Where the *Museum* failed to be a museum was in its dimensions. The ceiling was low, almost too low and it looked as though its guests only just fitted in the space between the black ground and the black ceiling. The

room reached out much further than the exterior suggested, or perhaps it was just an illusion created by deceptive architecture; the other ends of the room looked as far away as the subjects of the paintings hung about the room in arbitrary measures from one another.

‘There’s hope for you yet Orangutan, if all else fails you could steal one of those mannequins and try to fuck it. I am sure you could find a hole you could fit into on it somewhere, maybe a screw hole.’

‘Alright, Hond, keep it down there are ladies with us.’ But the others were laughing through their noses.

Tubes of light illuminated the corners of the space. Every bend, from ceiling to wall, wall to floor, and floor to bar, glowed with the liquid neon of the tubes that changed colour so slowly, you barely noticed. All this to hold the movement of bodies, the consumption of whatever substances could be found, and that impatient forgetting that made youth so foolish and so wanted.

There was room enough for them to move through the *Museum’s* guests and they did so, accustomed to the currents of debauchery. They reached the bar where they could redo their intoxication in a flood of whatever was cheapest with ease. Vetnek offered to pay for the first round, and bought everyone a shot and a chaser, the standard charge of a ‘round’.

‘Forgive us ladies, a quick briefing and we’ll be right back with you.’ Orangutan bowed like an idiot, turning his hand in circles and then around into the circle of faces.

‘Alright buggers, we have our charge. Prizes to the first to hook-up, he who hooks-up the most, a rumbler for the least, prize for the last to vomit, prize for the most to vomit, and rumbler for the first.’ Vetnek spoke as if reading from a treaty. ‘Other salient acts of genius or madness will be

recorded for review tomorrow morning in the pool. Questions?’

‘Yes.’ Orangutan leaned forward. ‘Dibs on the dolly with the glasses.’

‘That’s not a question and will be fined accordingly.’ Karp noted.

‘Hond, you good?’ Hond just nodded.

‘Ludo? A thousand fines if we catch you with Tagg.’

‘No need, I am gonna steal Orangutan’s dibs.’

They toasted, then downed their shots with all the vigour of naïve recruits. The taste burnt Charlie’s tongue and made his stomach turn. He wondered why he said what he did as saliva built up in his cheeks. He had no intention of stealing anyone, of talking to anyone, really. Some foreign part of him affronted his disposition and he failed to understand why he acquiesced so easily to disappearing behind that foreign thing. He sucked at the saliva in his mouth and swallowed it.

Something about this deviant lot overwrote the gentle parts of him and there, in the thick noise of electronic sounds and the fumes of alcohol coming off every surface, he was caught between letting go and losing himself, or holding on to those things he felt were unwanted, that had no value; the painter in him. He wondered what secret parts of them his friends were hiding. What effort it took to not lose yourself, to resist that crushing urge to run away from all of this. Did the others feel it too?

‘Excuse the delay ladies, we were just completing our pledge to the gods.’

The girl in glasses, Emma, Orangutan’s temporary crush smirked at him. ‘There are no gods here.’

‘Then let’s see what we get up to when no one is looking.’ Vetnek’s charm coming through.

‘Oooo, did you practice that one in the mirror?’ Emma’s friend asked cheekily.

‘No, but we can practice something else in the mirror if you’d like?’

Hond scoffed from the peripheries of the group and dropped his head into his palm. Both embarrassed and impressed. Emma’s lips tightened into a giggle as she waited for her friend’s response.

‘I don’t see any mirrors around here.’

‘Shall we go find some?’

She nodded, took his hand and they disappeared into the mass of bodies flashing in the lights from the stage.

‘What just happened?’ Orangutan looked around for an answer and was rewarded with laughter.

‘There really are no gods here.’

-

Charlie’s throat burnt with the acid of vomit. He spat out a few pieces of the boerewors roll and jagger floating around in him and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Though he wasn’t feeling too intoxicated, he knew he’d be the first to vomit. Something about losing control disagreed with him and his body rejected it with ardour.

Hond waited outside the cubicle for him fiddling with a toothpick. It stuck out of the start of a beard that curled off his jawline like desperate branches trying to root. His heavy eyes followed the movements of the other occupants of the grimy toilet. The surfaces stank of chemicals, not bleach, but something else, completely synthetic that burnt the hairs in your nostrils the same way vomit burnt your throat. He remained unaffected by it and studied the behaviour of the other drunks on *vac*.

Charlie worried briefly about leaving the bathrooms and being seen by one of the others who would know without a doubt that he lost one of the parameters of their ridiculous game, but after escaping the chemicals and vomit unseen, knew he'd be safe, as Hond would not betray the failure. They walked off quietly passed bouncing bodies to the VIP balcony on the second floor for some air.

The air cooled as night turned over the city. The sounds of music and revelry were muted and mixed indifferently with the sound of the waves in the distance after the doors were closed. The bodies outside moved sluggishly, the air around them smelling of dirt and pinecones, and their eyelids weighted with that dazed disconnection of someone trying to forget.

Hond lit a cigarette and Ludo climbed over the railings, his feet between the decorative cast-iron, holding himself up on the wood. Below him, *Museum* visitors chatted in groups, smoking, and drinking in the garden just outside without taking any notice of Ludo above them.

‘Have you seen the others?’

Hond said nothing.

Just then one of the stoned guests of the balcony dully lifted his arm and pointed at Ludo. ‘You’re gonna fall, get off from there.’

Hond gave him a look out of the corner of his eye that silenced him, and pushed the stranger’s worry back down his throat. A latent fury was always just waiting in his rough palms, and though he never lost his cool but at himself, the world kept him at an arms distance when they saw his damaged knuckles. Hands he hated.

‘Looking for an out from our games, Ludo. Vomited already?’ Karp closed the door on the noise to the *Museum* inside. ‘Falling off a balcony

won't excuse you from a loss. Give us one there, Hond.' Hond handed him a cigarette and he thanked him after popping the *gwaai* in his lips with surprising alacrity considering his state of consciousness. He grinned at his friends like a madman. He unzipped his trousers, snuck his chap between the railings and began to urinate on the plants below, oblivious to the shoulders and hair getting wet with his waste.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Ludo launched himself over the railing, almost faceplanting into the wood of the balcony. Karp looked down at the violent faces getting pissed on and waved, cock in hand and cigarette in his mouth. 'You could've fallen Ludo, just looking after the boy.'

Three of the garden drinkers moved to the doors aggressively. A mischievous panic on his face, Karp pinched off the remains of his waste, some dribbling down his black jeans and dropped the half-smoked cigarette in the yellow puddle around his sneakers.

'Don't know about you boys, but I am gonna take off.'

And they did, almost through the dilapidated wood of the door and some strangers on the other side of it. 'Try not to get caught.' Karp spat at them half laughing before disappearing into the mass of bouncing bodies again, raging to liquid drum and bass, lines of colour moving over them searchingly as the DJ performed for their audience of moving mannequins.

Hond and Ludo searched for an escape as the hulking biceps and triceps of bouncers filled the staircase passage across the room. They had little option but to hide in the crowd.

'How did we end up like this, Ludo?' Hond waited a second for an answer then ducked into the crowd. Ludo hesitated, then followed.

A series of apologies went unheard in the crowd as Ludo passed

through. There was no restraint, no embarrassment and the crowd danced with such abandon you'd think they aimed to die that night, to move until they collapsed.

Lights, sweat, closed eyes and swaying wrists unfolded around Charlie. He dodged a turning hand, missed reaching fingers and blushed at locked lips. The way things moved around him gave the impression that the ends of the room were falling away, that there was no end to it all, just bodies from here to the fall of the earth.

Though all body, there was something disembodied about it, unburdened with the weight of limbs and turning joints. It was an atomic unpredictable noise that you wanted nothing more than to lose yourself in, to disintegrate in the eyes and taste of another. To be here. To like the way he moved. He'd almost forgotten he was on the run, and instead admired the way everyone moved around him. Nameless, pretty youths thinking of nothing but the next drop that flooded the brain with that gorgeous rush of chemicals.

Hond was gone, and Charlie moved slower through the crowd. He recognized the next remix of a song he liked when he was younger. There was no hint of a bouncer being on his tail, and the song quietened his worry. Charlie caught himself moving a little as it started, looking around him, concluding that hiding here in all this movement, was his best bet. The track started its build up, and around him everyone abandoned their false performances and dressed themselves in what they wanted.

Don't you wanna know me,

A couple with cut features and stubble looked at each other and no one else.

Be a friend of mine?

A girl clicked her fingers and jumped in front of her friends with all that happiness Charlie thought only love or intoxication could offer. A girl turned in front of him and then back into the arms of another girl, her back against her and cheek searching for her lips.

Don't you ever get lonely,

A stranger looked up into the lights with no expression.

From time to time?

And then all that noise became something else; all the feeling in him finding a conduit through which to become real.

Don't let the system get you down.

And he danced. He danced like a scarecrow. Awkwardly at first, then with a little less self-consciousness. The speakers pulsed around him, igniting all the ache in him, the ache for hands in his, and a tongue in his mouth. When the chorus stopped, the kissing around him did not, and the staring stranger stared on into the lights, expressionless and drifting.

‘Charlie? Charlie.’ Tagg grabbed his forearm and turned him around.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Hiding.’ Charlie yelled under the music with a cheeky smile.

‘Hiding from what?’

Tagg moved into him, their bodies almost touching. ‘It’s good to see you. Who or what is coming after you?’ She giggled. ‘Hello, say something dork.’ She poked his cheek to get his attention, but all he could return was a blush and a smile. ‘Follow me.’ She took his hand and lead him out of the dancefloor and its desperate pockets of existence.

She took him downstairs to a worn door with a ‘no access’ sign on it, pushed it open and pulled him in. The room, or what looked like an

abandoned workshop of sorts, must have been soundproofed, as the raging tumult of the *Museum* was diminished, distant. Around them, tools and boxes were piled about. Mannequin parts lay around in a thin layer of fibreglass that clung to everything around the workstation like dust.

Seeing the limbs, reflecting the dull light of the room, Tagg remembered her own and, as if she just became aware that her hand was interlocked with his, she let go of Charlie's hand.

‘What is this room?’

‘This is where the owner makes those weird statues for the club.’

Tagg circled the room, tracing her fingers over the objects, careful to avoid what fibreglass was left on any surfaces. She made her way to the opposite side of the room and dropped into the couch against the wall, lifting her sneakers over its puffy arm.

Under the faint light, her legs looked coated in honey, now hardly covered by her black dress. She adjusted, got comfier, shuffled lower into the cushions, but did nothing to lower the ends of her dress.

‘Whaaaat?’

Charlie looked away, hoping the colour of his cheeks was hidden in the orange hues of the room, embarrassed by his boyish retreat. ‘How do you know the owner?’

She didn't answer. Just tongued the inside of her cheek, thinking of other things and then:

‘What are we hiding from?’

‘Just silly mistakes.’

A silence fell between them.

Charlie examined some of the parts and tools the sculptor must have used to create the deformed figures in the main hub of the *Museum*. They

were jagged things, that left jagged marks in the plastic limbs and the random paraphernalia used to hold everything together and add features to the template mannequins.

‘You want to be an artist, don’t you?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘How would you sculpt me?’ Tagg sat up, crossed her legs and looked at Charlie with anticipation.

‘I am better with colours than I am with fibreglass.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Come here. Show me what you would do.’ She stood and stretched her arms out to the side, the ends of her dress falling passed her knees.

Charlie scoffed, then moved towards her.

‘Bring a tool silly, you can’t take me apart without one.’

Charlie took a crafting knife and stood just an arm’s length from her as she reassumed her pose, half smiling, half apprehensive. ‘All yours.’

He looked at her. Really looked at her. The sneakers, a little dirty, but the ankles clean, milky in the shadow of her dress. The dress hugged her waist, coiled around her like a cloth jealous of her form, of the V-shaped lines Charlie imagined falling down the sides of her hips and between her thighs. A gentle impression of ribs under the curve of her breasts, just enough for the dress to acquiesce to their shape and leave wanting thoughts.

‘And? Any ideas?’

Charlie’s eyes darted up and looked into hers. Her playfulness was replaced with something else, something serious and desperate, and Charlie become aware of the blood rushing through him.

‘What would you cut away?’

Charlie moved closer to her and put the blade on her collarbone.
Then retracted it.

‘Nothing.’

She looked at his touch, then up into his eyes.

‘Nothing?’

Her ribs felt tighter in her chest, the dress constricting, like all of her wanted to be opened. There were other ways to be cut open and she wanted to undo herself with him, to be seen. The way he looked at her, she thought maybe he’d see, maybe he’d call out the falseness of her social personality and ask her who she really was, ask her what she really wanted, but would somehow already know.

Charlie gulped down his shyness, felt the nerve endings in his fingers wake to the softness of her neck, the tangles of her hair. He dropped the sculpting knife into the fibreglass dust on the floor and moved closer to her.

‘What parts ...’ Her voice was quieter than she wanted, hushed in the warm tones of sweat and almonds that infiltrated her thoughts and evaporated most of them save for a few.

‘What parts of me would you keep?’ She felt the excitement in him against her belly and then a wetness between her thighs.

‘The parts you keep hiding.’

The words touched her cheek and her hands lifted to his. Heat filled her, her lungs and limbs full of a steam that whirled between her legs and precipitated between her thighs. She wanted to pull him into her. She closed her eyes, waiting for him, his lips so near to hers.

But all was interrupted by the swing of the door and flip of a switch that flooded the room with unnatural light. Charlie pulled away when he

heard a voice and was anxious that he had been found out.

‘Tagg, darling is that you?’

‘Anil?’

A tall, woman made of mahogany with black curls entered the room. Behind her, an angsty buzz cut in boots and a pink Pokémon shirt.

‘Forgive the interruption, dear. Looks we came in here for the same reason as you.’

‘We are hiding.’

‘Form what?’ Anil tugged on the arm of the cutie with her and pushed him into an armchair near the workshop desk. His features were feminine, fierce, and the eyes wanting. Charlie recognized him as the guy staring up into the ceiling on the dancefloor. He looked half the age of Anil, but not at all out of place.

‘Are you going to play with us?’ Anil let her thick black hair down without taking her eyes off the youth in the armchair. He looked back with dazed anticipation.

‘I think those looking for us will have forgotten our faces by now.’ Charlie ran his fingers through his hair nervously and tried to subtly signal to Tagg that they should leave.

‘Oh, what did you do? I guess I am the one looking for you now.’ She turned and moved towards them for a closer look. ‘Both of you. My darling Tagg and?’

‘Charlie.’ Tagg tilted her head to allow Anil’s fingers to run across her cheek.

‘So, you are staying?’

Tagg’s voice broke a little and she couldn’t speak. Anil waited for a response from Charlie that never came.

‘Perhaps you two should talk it over.’ She dropped her hand impatiently and lowered herself into the lap of her toy across the room and proceeded to lick his neck. The fibreglass particles fell to rest around them.

‘Let’s go. We can walk down to the seafront and bury our toes in the sand.’

‘I can’t.’ Tagg looked across at the entangled bodies of Anil and the stranger. ‘I want to stay.’

‘But, why? Tagg, come with me.’

Anil had turned on the lap of the buzzcut and was watching them, touching the back of his head as he bit her ear listlessly.

Tagg thought about it. ‘I don’t know.’ Pressed up against him now, he could feel her heart accelerating and see her pupils dilate as she looked up at him with affection. ‘This is what I want to be.’

Charlie doubted that. He thought he could see then one of her false masks hide her features.

‘Stay, aren’t you curious?’

Of course. Of course, I am. Is all he wanted to say but couldn’t find the words. Anxiety painted his expression and Tagg withdrew, seeing it press its hooks into him. ‘I, uh, I don’t know.’

A resignation and faint sadness set into Tagg’s eyes. ‘Well, I do.’

Charlie could feel his cheeks swell and parts of him arrest, feeling unfamiliar and not his own, like they were cut from plastic and glued to him with some cruel intention. He looked down, as so often he did, then to the wall hoping to find something he could say written there, a mask he could throw on himself and be what the scene asked for.

Tagg kissed his cheek. ‘Just leave, it’s okay. I’ll find you.’

-

Seven years later, she found him in Tokyo. Without looking. There he was, teasing her as an oaf of a Hamlet played out his part in the Meiji University theatre. Then following a black fingertipped stranger out of a film set.

He thought then of the rest of that evening seven years ago when he left the workshop him and Tagg were hiding in, left her to the touch of others, and sat outside it for half an hour. Orangutan and Karp found him, pulled him to his feet. They drank and forgot. They broke a toilet cubicle door and laughed and danced and flirted with strangers and forgot and drank. The workshop door half faded into the textures of the wall. And the Museum raged on, all the sounds of existence falling out of its doors with intoxicated youths.

They found themselves on the beach an hour or so before the day. The composition of hairy red eye boys from the roof earlier that morning all quiet in the sand and sounds of the waves. Vetnek slept, Orangutan and Karp relived the highlights of the evening, and Hond and Charlie waited for something to come into view on the horizon.

‘What’s wrong?’ Forever perceptive, Hond felt the things turning in Charlie and took minutes to find the courage to ask.

‘Nothing.’

Dark waves coiled over themselves in white folds.

‘It’s just that, I pretend to be better, feign this high-horse bullshit like I am a gentleman or something of the sorts.’

‘Yeah, it’s annoying.’ Hond smiled and received a laugh.

‘I know. Truth is, when we all get a touch mad, I feel it too. I want

nothing more than to let go and be filthy and real and let the ichor run through me. But ...' Charlie paused.

'Yeah?'

'But really, I am just so afraid. Afraid of everything.'

The horizon moved in their drunk eye. All distance and emptiness.

'We all are, Ludo.'

'I want to be more than all this fear in me.'

-

'We are almost there. It's closer to the residential areas.' Ryota's voice sounded different under the arches of Shimo-Kitazawa station, more diminished than it was in the gallery. He knew of a gallery Charlie could maybe display his art and, not needed on set, took them there.

Everything was so quiet when they left the bustling station for the borders of the residential areas. The city was dormant here and etched out perfectly in boxes and windows of lights falling on the roads in intervals that betrayed nothing of the invisible worlds inside. How such inconsistencies from one station to the next could exist, gave Charlie pause for thought, but the thoughts weren't at all negative.

Perhaps, he thought as they followed Ryota, each station was some permutation of another, an adjacent world in which you could vanish, or be someone else. You could play out your death for an evening and, for less than 200 yen, catch the subway to the next station and be forgotten entirely. Distance carried a different meaning in Tokyo.

Tagg, who looked as though she were trying to find something in a memory followed quietly. It was not like Charlie to want something like this and when she caught glimpses of his melancholic obstinacy,

something like admiration filled her chest and the search was abated.

They'd exhausted conversation some minutes ago and the two foreigners were pleased to arrive at Ryota's neighbour's gallery. It looked more like an abandoned house from decades back and nothing like what Charlie was hoping to find. He shut his expectations with his eyelids, then opened them again, hoping to feel something different.

Ryota had explained that the husband of their neighbour, now an old lady, was a painter and that she stored all his paintings in a gallery just outside of Shimo-Kitazawa, still crammed with all his things – clothes, books, newspaper cutouts and the other paraphernalia that makes someone who they are. Mrs. Nishikawa tended to the gallery out of love and perhaps out of that desperation not to lose someone completely. She'd sell a couple of his paintings from time to time and bought others when there was extra money lying around. Ryota thought she'd be more than happy to display Charlie's paintings.

The gallery was a wooden building you'd expect to find in a Kurosawa film, rain forever falling on its black tiled roof. It was ungainly, as if it might collapse, fall over into history and bury whatever was inside. The buildings around it were far more modern, cement cubes cut out of cold rock. The area looked like a collection of Tetris pieces that had fallen randomly into the shape of buildings with this piece of stubborn history in the middle, refusing to disappear or be forgotten. Each house had a trinket somewhere, or pots of flowers around the front door, a kaleidoscope whirligig or two that could so easily be missed, the only traces of a personality. But the gallery's personality was its history, its refusal to be bought, a tortoise shell in the shadow of cement treelike buildings.

To their surprise a girl around their age opened the door to Ryota's

knock.

'Oh tuna, it's you.' She slouched against the doorway.

'Yui. If I knew you were here, I just would've sent you a message. Is Mrs. Nishikawa here?'

Yui corrected her posture upon noticing the strangers behind Ryota. She examined them over Ryota's shoulder, nodded and closed the door. Seconds later a curved, smiling lady opened the door.

'Little Mori, you've brought guests. Please come in and have some cake with us. I've asked Yui to prepare some tea.'

'Thank you very much Mrs. Nishikawa. We would love to. However, they have an appointment quite soon and won't be able to stay for long.'

Tagg and Charlie eyed each other awkwardly, Charlie trying to follow the conversation and Tagg watching him fail.

'Nonsense, there is always time for tea.' She pushed the bulky Ryota out of the way and invited the guests in with exaggerated gestures of kindness. They all found themselves charmed by the lady's permanent smile tucked in all her rolls of wrinkles.

The three of them had to duck to fit through the *shoji*, then remained a little bowed inside, the roof threatening to fall on them as the wood moaned at their arrival. It was within old buildings like these that Charlie felt out of sorts. All the dimensions were compact, and all the spaces seemed to be occupied by something. It was disorientating despite the fact that everything was in its place, some books or canvases more dishevelled or disorganized than others, but in its place nonetheless, as if all of it existed just to collect dust here in this box of memories.

Ryota navigated the space perfectly, he must have visited this gallery a hundred times. He knew how to pass through the paintings piled against

bookcases and forgotten furniture, the CRT monitors, the boxes of stuff almost out of the way but not quite. But the foreigners didn't and when they entered, they tried not to disturb the logic of chaos that pervaded the room.

'Tea and cake and tea.' The lady hobbled in the direction of a doorframe that led to a kitchenette.

'Thank you but we don't need cake. It's okay.' Charlie tried to stop her then worried he hadn't used the correct phrase, trying to recall the phrases from his lessons and textbooks on polite refusals.

'Oh, he speaks Japanese.' She yelled into the back, *'Yu-chan we've found you a husband.'* There was no response from inside and a wind buffeted the *shoji*.

'Thank you again, Mrs. Nishikawa, but they really cannot stay. We have just come to ask if you would like to display his paintings? We were lucky to find you here so late.'

'Don't worry dear boy, we were just cleaning up, organising a few things. So, you are a painter?' She navigated the maze of objects and paintings and pushed her fingertip into Charlie's chest.

'Yes. Something like that.'

'You either are, or you aren't.' She poked again.

'Then I am.'

'Show me.'

A second's confusion flooded Charlie as he searched his pockets, unable to find the prints. Tagg reached out and handed them to her.

'I got you.' She smiled at him.

Mrs Nishikawa took them into her blue, veiny fingers, swollen with years of taking care of things. She pinched her bulbous nose as she

examined the pictures. *'Oh, not bad. A little disturbing, but not bad.'* Yui entered the room with a tray of tea. Mrs. Nishikawa spoke almost to herself. *'I'd love to display these, but I can't.'*

Charlie searched his other pockets. *'Wait, I have more. Let me show you.'*

'Not because they are bad. But because I am selling the gallery.'

'What? Really?' Ryota asked the back of Mrs. Nishikawa, then looked to Yui for confirmation.

'Look at my hands.' She gave him back the copies of his paintings. *'They can't do this anymore, and it is time I said goodbye.'*

'What did she say?' Tagg tried to find a space to stand next to them, shuffling passed bookshelves and labelled boxes: *clothing, paintbrushes, Akiko.*

'She can't.'

'She is selling the gallery.' Ryota continued the explanation for Charlie, who wasn't hiding the sadness of having found failure again. *'I didn't know you were selling, Mrs. Nishikawa. I am sorry to hear that. I love this place.'* Ryota spoke to her with such grace and patience, like she was his own grandmother. Love passed from each to the other despite the formality of Ryota's Japanese.

After a second's quiet, punctuated with Charlie trying to swallow his disappointment, Ryota mourning the loss of another space that felt like home, and Yui stirring tea in the back, a bittersweet expression set into Mrs. Nishikawa's face and she spoke to repair the wounds in the room.

'Oh, dear boy, don't give up.' She touched his cheek. *'I know it's not much, but take it from me, it's worth trying. It is worth failing a hundred times just to sell a couple paintings. The world may not have loved my*

husband's paintings, but I did, I do. I'd give all the tea in the world just to see him painting in the corner of the room again, just to get one last new painting of his.'

Mrs Nishikawa reached out for Ryota, who jumped up and held her arm, guiding her back to the counter. *'Regret is heavy and will only hurt the bones in your back from carrying it around.'* Patting her crooked back softly. *'Sometimes we can't get what we want, what we think we need, but we have tea to fill the holes, don't we?'*

'What did she say?' Tagg almost held Charlie's hand.

'I don't know.' But Charlie did. He recognized enough of the language to have his sadness replaced with fatigue, and though he was smiling at Tagg, the only happiness in it was that she was there. The stuffiness of wet books and untreated wood irritated Charlie's nose. He wanted to sneeze, or cry, or sigh, but just smiled, looking around at all the things of the ghost he would become, a failed painter. The gallery closed in around him, portraits the colour of the walls that said nothing but that someone like this existed once. Or didn't.

Yui pitied everyone in the room and looked at her tea like it was tasteless water. She disappeared into the back to find some cake she could offer them.

'Would you like your tea then, Mrs. Nishikawa?' Ryota asked.

'You never have to ask, boy.' She said this to Charlie and Tagg, then turned to where Ryota served her tea. *'Join us, please.'*

'We'd love to, but we don't want to miss our exhibition.' Tagg rested her arms over Charlie's shoulders again and had the expression of a classical painting in the gloomy gallery.

The goodbyes were awkward, textbooks said little of how to

navigate the social etiquette of what they just experienced. But Ryota's gentle disposition repaired their casual admiration for each other, and, after they refused his offer to walk them to the station, Tagg even managed to steal a hug from the floating Ryota with his wavy hair.

Taking their leave, Charlie looked back at the strange architecture of the building. In a bay window on the second floor, Yui looked out, the soft glow of a candle lighting up her angular, almost metallic face. Her attention dropped to Charlie, and they made eye contact for a second or two. Then she returned to what she was doing and hurried away.

'She's adorable, I hope I age like that.' Tagg pushed her cheeks together into a pout. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. Need a drink though.'

'Wait!' Yui came out of the *shoji* into the narrow alley. 'I am sorry we couldn't do anything to help. Please have some cakes.' She looked down at bite sized pieces of cheesecake.

'Thank you so much, I love cake.' Tagg bit into the cake before Charlie could even lift his. He thanked Yui who tried to offer kindness in the form of taste, just as her grandmother would have. They turned and left Yui alone in the alley. She wanted to reach out and ask them to take her with. But the alley was quiet. The gallery closed. And everything just out of reach.

-

The rest of the evening lost its tangibility to a more dream like quality as the colours of Tokyo oozed out reality. Tagg, now excited for the exhibition pulled Charlie into a convenience store where they bought a cheap Chilean wine and drank it from the bottle as they walked through a

park to the building where the exhibition was being held. Roppongi held similarities to Shibuya, full of life and light, but differed in that there were far more glass buildings, far more transparency. Their reflections were replaced with the emptiness of office building lobbies and emptying stores that, by architecture alone, looked expensive.

The wine flushed their cheeks, and they were back to teasing each other with all the silliness a bottle of wine brought. After getting lost a couple times, they managed to find the correct building. Another tower of glass and metal. They weren't sure why there'd be a Basquiat exhibition here, but followed the current of people in evening wear, masks, and the pseudo seriousness of exhibition goers.

'I think we needed to lose a cat before coming here, I haven't seen a single smile'

'Most people are wearing masks, dummy.' The escalator had levelled their eyes, and they looked at each other's, first with a laugh, and then with something else, as if they'd just eaten flowers.

The escalator ascended through a narrow passage, mirrors on the left and a view of the city on the right. It looked like a network of light nodes from their view on the 16th floor, a series of spherical lanterns distorting in the glass across the horizon.

Charlie wanted to hold her waist, and maybe put his cheek against hers from behind as the escalator carried them to the exhibition. All the emptiness of the view had made him want to abolish the space between them, to fall into her the way snow falls into snow. But he faltered and instead made a goofy expression into the mirror and Tagg, taking her phone from her pocket, took a bunch of photos of them like Tokyo was their private photo booth. The art crowd pretended not to notice, looking

away where they could.

‘For some reason I am nervous the lady at the entrance is going to know we have drunk a bottle of wine. Is it obvious?’

‘Not to those who don’t know you, I think.’ Her cheeks were rosy, and eyes glossy behind her glasses, lips full and moving into a smile.

‘What? Stop looking at me.’

Again the ache to collapse the spaces between them, to taste her 16 floors closer to the constellations.

‘Don’t you dare.’ She lifted the tickets between their faces as if reading his mind. Charlie allowed a little laugh at himself as Tagg gave him his ticket, looking cheekier than ever.

The art on display in the exhibition was not the kind that dropped out of memory. After a brief introductory room with photographs and all the biographical details to appreciate what Basquiat was, the exhibition opened up into what looked like a hospital ward. The rooms were white, clinical and the art in them desperately vibrant, violent, and anatomical. The paintings were highly saturated with colours. To look at them was to feel, aggressively, those unnameable things only visual art could show; the mangled clump of human feeling trying to eat its own tail, like an eyeless worm.

Charlie’s failure was in every image, looking back at him.

Though moved at first, maybe a little disturbed, Tagg and Charlie lost their composure quickly and began to mock the other visitors to the exhibition, hiding laughter and the wine in their bellies where they could. Disguising what they were feeling in games and foolishness.

Something did catch their attention, however, and reset their intrigue in Basquiat. A wall of lined pages with what they guessed to be poems or

something like them robbed them of their silliness. Tagg admired one for quite some time:

This is not in praise of poison
ing myself. Waiting for ideas
to happen · myself · this is not
in praise of poison.

Looking at her, Charlie became aware of the reality of them being together in Tokyo. Seven years suddenly altered the image of the girl standing next to him. She became a stranger, perfectly unknowable, and all the turnings of her thoughts were as unclear to him as Basquiat's. She stood there as opaque as everything hanging on the walls, as deeply saturated in feeling.

It was only then that Charlie thought about the probability of it all. How infinitesimal it was. Nothing about their being there made sense. It was impossible, arbitrary, absurd almost. How could acquaintances who orbited each other in clubs in the same diminished town across the globe somehow have found each other in this exhibition hall in Tokyo? It all distilled itself into a strangeness so palpable it stuck to the fingers like glue.

Try though he did, Charlie could not help but feel something like meaning in it all, some semblance of order distilled so impossibly into the form of the girl next to him, laughing from her bespectacled eyes and pink, wine cheeks. He feared that if he took her hand, that glue of strangeness would fasten them together. Hesitating, he put his hands in his pockets, fearing then that it wouldn't.

Charlie looked at one of Basquiat's scribbled poems:

Unable to sting her

Or or fly away

‘They’re a little overwrought, but I like them.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

-

For all the faces and eyes in the room, the two of them felt perfectly isolated. The fear of language errors and a less obvious fatigue of miscommunication kept them from speaking to others and others to them. It was like no one was really there. Not even the two wine-drunk fools who pretended at a life together in Tokyo visiting galleries and parks. Their little fiction, for all its romantic aesthetics, would end. They drank another glass of wine in the lounge at the end of the exhibit and spoke of all their memories; dancing at the gigs and festivals where they always somehow bumped into each other, and the thin ugly life of pothole towns and cigarette evenings, all of which lost its density in the black Tokyo night. They avoided the topic of Durban, the last time they saw each other.

Their bellies asked for food so the two of them took their leave to whatever ramen bar they could find in the area. They found a bar, oily pork broth and *highball* fumes wafting out of the entrance and were welcomed by a chubby gentleman dressed as a ramen chef. They used the vending machine at the entrance and chose their dishes, half guessing from the pictures. Then gave their tickets at the bar. A businessman on their right lifted his bowl of ramen to his chin and slurped up the noodles with skill and grace.

‘Can you do that?’ Tagg asked, impressed, and finding her

playfulness again.

‘The noodles don’t move when I try, I just slurp up the broth around them.’

‘How do you say, ‘who is better’?’

Charlie thought for a second, not expecting the question. ‘*Dare ga yoi desu ka*, could work I guess.’

‘Okay we get a couple rounds of practice then we are asking the chef which of us is better, the winner gets ...’ she paused. ‘The winner gets to do whatever they want with the loser.’

‘Whatever they want?’

‘Something like that.’

Two delicious bowls of ramen were placed in front of them; a boiled egg floating in the centre, *nori* decoratively placed on the side and slices of pork opposite that. Some spring onion sprinkled over the top. And all the organs in Charlie’s body moaned with hunger. This is why food was such an adored love language in Japan.

They got to it. Slurping and splashing broth all over themselves and each other. A messy affair of failed attempts and laughter, washed down with gulps of beer between tries. They’d agreed they were both ready and got the attention of the chef.

‘*Dare ga yoi desu ka?*’ Tagg made something like a slurping gesture, her best guess at it without the noodles involved, and the chef gave an excited guttural ‘*ehhhhh*’, calling over the other chefs to watch the competition.

‘You’re going down painter boy.’

‘Dream on, little teacher.’

The chefs counted them down and they performed their best versions

of a slurp, trying however they could to earn their Japanese badge and lose the term *gaijin* with their cheeks, lips and tongues. In the end, both their cheeks were wet with broth, their eyes wide suppressing urges to burp up beer and pork. They looked up at the chefs who smiled wildly. They turned to confer, huddled, and argued. Turning back to their proteges, they paused for effect and the tallest chef in the front, with thin, handsome features, pointed to Charlie and loudly announced ‘Winner!’

Tagg protested, gesturing to her form and the madness of the chefs who laughed at her and continued to point at Charlie, who was looking at Tagg smugly, doing little bows and nods of the head to his audience.

‘Whatever I want, hey?’ Charlie nudged Tagg’s arm mockingly.

‘Before the last train, of course.’ She winked.

‘Inventions by the loser. Still an hour and a half.’

-

With little over an hour until the midnight trains home, Tagg and Charlie revisited the park they passed through earlier, a lethargic cosy feeling of noodles in their bellies. The sounds of passing trains softened in the wooded nook between the grey, indifferent towers of Roppongi. The voices of the city, its interminable ambience was dimmed to just the voices of those in earshot; the strangers who moved indistinctly on the other side of the little lake in the middle of the park. All sound was cushioned by leaves and shrubs. Lights were strung from trees across the water, hovering like *hotaru* carrying the souls of those lost in their abdomens.

It all felt terribly gorgeous to Charlie and for that, he felt silly, a little drunk, and perhaps a little enamoured. A part of him disliked the setting, the transience of it all that hid in the eaves like watchful spirits, observing

the visitors to their woodland, with all its memories and ghosts that moved around invisibly like insects. Tagg's looked at home in the trees and leafed ends of things around them.

'I can't believe you beat me.'

'Guess that makes me more Japanese than you.'

They passed a couple somewhere in their 50's. They were sitting on a bench. Their shoulders were touching, but they didn't talk and looked away sadly as though they had something terribly important to say, but couldn't.

'You have been here longer.' They reached the end of the water.

'And probably will be after I leave.'

Charlie jumped up onto a raised patch of grass, held back by a stone wall and took on a role of blustering foolishness. A tree branching out over them became the roof of his stage. 'I am but mad north-north-west, when the wind is southerly, I know a raven from a jigsaw.'

Tagg applauded lifting her nose to the trees. 'Excellent, excellent. Though I am not sure those are the words. Think you'd make a good Hamlet?'

'Doubtful.' He dropped onto his bum, bouncing his heels off the stones. 'Not much of an actor, too many eyes.'

'I think I'd be a masterful Ophelia.'

'To drown yourself in the end?'

'Yes, and you can paint the image of my corpse.'

'I love that painting.'

Tagg sat next to Charlie, almost on his lap. The water barely moved, and the reeds swayed as though puppetted by the branches above them. Tokyo had made Charlie a stranger to himself. He couldn't tell Tagg why

he left, what brought him to the pretending city, and he questioned how much of who he was now, or who was before was as much a performance as those who gave the city its textures, aromas, and sounds; if he were acting now with Tagg or if this was him.

It was lonely – all that pretending. Every window, every train, all the temples and office buildings and department stores were full of people playing out their negligible part. And yet, Tokyo felt like the loneliest corner of the earth. Charlie always wondered if they would continue the rest of their lives replacing what the city could be with a polite simulation of a city that made the closest proximity to another feel like an impossible distance.

But somehow, within that loneliness, against unfathomable odds, they found each other, and memories hurried back like tired children after a day of tea parties, tadpole catching, and the tragedies of the overwrought days of youth. It was difficult not to feel in love with her, however quiet a feeling it had to be.

‘Do you remember how we met?’

‘I do, you asked about my necklace at that pub, I can’t remember its name.’

‘*Devils.*’

‘*Devils*, yeah. You said you admired my necklace, we talked for a minute and that was it.’

‘We never really talked much, though we were always at the same gigs.’

‘I guess painters have to pretend to be shy.’

A train left a station nearby and tunnelled into the cooling air.

‘I don’t know if I am pretending. Don’t you get tired of being

someone else?’

He asked this as if he knew the questions she often asked herself when she was alone. Tagg rested her hands on his shoulder, then her chin on her hands, looking at his cheeks and lips, the way his eyes moved as he thought.

‘Yeah, sometimes. What about you?’

‘I am very tired.’

Tagg lay down in the grass. ‘Okay, lie here with me and we can pretend to be ourselves. Come on, I’m waiting.’

But he failed to move. ‘I think if I did, I would fall asleep for a month.’

Tagg closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like to sleep next to him, to wake up together and live a normal life. The cells in her chest diffused a warm affection into her other limbs. She opened her eyes but was still looking at his back. ‘Do you think you could live a normal life?’

‘Is this not a normal life?’

‘No.’

‘Hmm, then maybe not.’

‘Always pulled away, like you are now?’

Charlie turned onto his side, half over Tagg. His chest inflated slowly, calmly and collapsed with no effort around all the feeling in him. ‘I am here.’

‘Are you really? What are you going to do with me then, broody bot – as your prize for noodle slurping?’

‘I am still thinking.’

‘Think quicker, the trains are nearing their last run. And so are we.’

All the light of the city illuminated the underbellies of the clouds.
There were never any stars in the centre of the city.

‘Let’s imagine they move slower tonight.’

Just then they heard the announcement of another arriving train in the distance. It sounded as though it came from a different world, a muted recording from a film they’d seen.

‘Do you think they’d wait, just for us?’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then what do you want?’

The train left the station and tunnelled into the cooling air.

‘I want to feel real. Like all of this is really happening. This city has a way of making you feel like you’re disappearing. Don’t you think?’

Charlie said this looking at the grass next to her.

‘Yeah, sometimes.’

‘How is it that Tokyo feels emptier than the deserts back home.’

Everything in him turned into air. ‘Why didn’t you leave with me, that day in *Museum*?’

‘You remember that?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I don’t know.’ Tagg covered her eyes with her forearm. ‘I guess I there were things I didn’t know that I wanted to know.’

‘Didn’t you want to know me?’

Tagg lifted herself onto her elbows. ‘I did. I do. But a part of me feels like you’ll always be a stranger, like you’re too far away.’

‘Yeah.’ Charlie fell onto his back next to her, looking at the leaves.

‘Don’t be sad, sad boy.’ She nudged him. Then lifted herself over him. ‘Here.’ She kissed him. A seven-year absence played out in a minute,

in a desperate searching of lips. It raged in them, ached in them, wanting to pause everything, to hold time there in the impossibility of their being together. She knew him then, and he her, in that wordless language, that brief interlude where the trains did stop for however little an infinity and they could love as gods, as insects in a timeless Tokyo.

But the next train arrived and brought with it impermanence. Their kiss ended and Tagg looked down at Charlie, the memory of him that faded into the ghostly aspect of the grass. The ache in Charlie inflated, and he was caught in that deranged interval, that madness of love, all of him abolished by the image of Tagg, forgetting the world behind her, the leaves that hid them from the moon, and branches, and *hotaru* lights that begged for confession.

‘Real enough?’

The night heaved with that curious combination of melancholy and happiness.

‘Real enough.’

-

When they returned to the station with twenty minutes left before the last trains, Charlie and Tagg said their goodbyes, hugging multiple times, half embarrassed and half with the awkwardness of trying to show how they felt, what they felt. They chose a day to see each other again before Tagg left to return to Johannesburg. They waved, and smiled, reversing away from each other until Tagg turned the corner to her platform.

They never saw each other again.

Chapter 3 – Karaoke

Yui's return was nothing like she expected. Though her last few days in Dublin were punctured with thoughts of what it would be like to come back to Yokohama, the reality of it was nothing as she imagined, nothing like she recalled. It is not easy to think of home as a mutable thing, as something that changes. What was the Yamagata fruit and vegetable store was now an *Inageya* supermarket. What was the Sasamoto household plot was now an apartment tower. How so many lives fitted into such limited space disturbed Yui, made the air around her thinner and the streets she rode her bike down looked like false imitations of what they were.

Though in all these differences, some things remained, little things that now seemed significant because they were the same. Plants and mould grew, and things aged, but the aroma of jasmine tea in the living room seemed it would float there forever. The azaleas in the garden bloomed around the same time every year and were pruned to retain their shape, to make them look immortal. The neighbours woke and left at the same times, a little greyer perhaps, but the same faces, the same suits, and the same cars. And she was one of them, covering herself in the impersonal tones of a suit and rushing off with the lines of people to the station.

With the help of Ryota, Yui got a job as a student counsellor at an English conversation school. She'd been at it a couple months. The commute to the learning studio began with a walk to the station. The morning cold stuck to all the walls and the garden plants of her route through the neighbourhood which, quiet at first, would get busier as she neared the station, commuters shuffling forward through the day with

surgical masks and vacant expressions. The roads were a limbo of sorts, aimless bodies forming lines from their homes to the stations, walls and leaves wet with morning dew.

Her train ride was an hour long and required one transfer. Yui would read on the train regardless of whether she got a seat or had to stand. Some men still stank of beer from the night before and some women would rush to do their makeup on the train, pausing seconds before the train slowed so as not to get eyeliner on their cheeks. Yui observed the mundanity of it all with indifference, thinking herself just outside the ordinariness of it all, as everyone does.

Yui would take the stairs to the third floor of their building, then walk around to the less frequented elevators in the back of the building to steal an extra minute of privacy before her 10-hour shifts. The staff of the recruitment agency next to the learning studio were too talkative for her, too full of their own thoughts, overflowing with a meaning she didn't understand. It was rare someone joined her in those elevators to the 11th floor and she was only ever bothered by a balding janitor with a contagious smile. He never said a word to her.

The senior counsellor, Ms. Itō, would already be vacuuming the lesson booths and wiping down the surfaces with disinfectant when Yui arrived. The smell was oddly calming to Yui, and she would politely greet Ms. Itō then store her packed lunch in the staffroom fridge, change to her formal heels and blazer and help with the preparation of the learning studio.

The studio was somewhat new, and, to Yui's disappointment, there weren't a lot of foreign teachers. The busy weekend shifts saw up to fifteen, but chatting and resting in the breakroom was quite impossible on

those chaotic days and business students would come in demanding new phrases and documentation editing and presentation practice, and sometimes how to express something quietly overwhelming them. Yui would have to nervously convey some ridiculous task to one of the teachers who would laugh and do what they could.

The number of teachers in the week hovered around four to five. Yui's justification for the change from translation to counselling was that it would be a good way to maintain her conversational English and to expose herself to new cultures and phrases, but that was the surface answer, the Japanese answer. When really, she could teach English herself, almost perfectly. It was the disconnection she felt with her home that drew her to the job, that vague want to be something other than what you are. At the learning studio, teachers were wanted because they were different, and she hoped that idea would include her.

A part of her was just looking for a reason to leave again. But all she'd found in the first couple months was the monotony of Tokyo days and a deeper loneliness that reached out of 11th floor windows and drained the city of its colours, leaving it a grey mass of the unfulfilled.

The flexible schedules and unending lesson slots at the studio made it a little awkward for everyone to socialize with each other. Some teachers chose absurdly long shifts and for the most part kept to themselves. But they did manage to form an *izakaya* group of *yakitori* nibbling, beer sipping types that would, a couple times a month, retreat to the local *Torikizoku* for chicken and whatever alcohol interested them that day. ¥280 for everything on the menu.

Of this group, Yui liked Xavier most. A hulking figure with round, fat cheeks and enormous hands that looked like they could almost reach a

second octave on the piano if you looked quickly. He was in his early forties, to Yui's best estimation. His New York accent and charming wit always stole the room and made Yui feel safe. Some days he would hug Yui hello or goodbye and she'd hold on for an extra second because of his burly warmth and softness.

Her second favourite was a Swedish girl, Svea. She drank sake exclusively. Nothing else. And always looked like she was daydreaming. She was always touching something and wore rings to distract her busy fingers, often responding to questions in the most unexpected ways, proving that she did indeed live in her own floating world.

Iman was always with them, the third of the five resident teachers at the studio. He spoke with a French accent, and used a curious but not incorrect form of English that made the language sound strange and beautiful coupled with an early 1930's enchanted view of things. Algerian phrases snuck into his dialect and Yui tried to remember them, but often could not.

When they first started going out, the counsellors sat together on one side of the table and the teachers on the other. It must have looked quite comical; Yui, Iori, and Seiga – the three junior counsellors – huddled together across from Xavier, Svea and Iman. After a couple visits to the *izakaya* they'd mix and match with the familiarity of friends. But Yui could not shake the feeling of transience in their connection. As though one day they'd walk out of the *izakaya* or the learning studio and never see each other again.

'Okay, but how does flirting work in Japan without sarcasm and teasing?' Xavier boomed with a laugh.

'It doesn't.' Iori said, sipping her highball.

‘Look, I am no expert, but the absence of sarcasm in Japan is thing, a real damn thing.’

‘Maybe your version of flirting is fallacious, Xavier.’ Svea noted.

‘I’ll have you know I am an absolute charmer.’ Xavier winked at her.

‘Was that it? Was that flirting?’ Seiga pointed between Xavier and Svea.

‘Yes, as you can see, I’m trembling with anticipation and lust.’ Svea sipped her sake indifferently.

‘I am so confused.’ The other’s laughed at Seiga’s despair. A clownish type, and the type who, when you became friends, would cage the ocean for you if he could. A boyish appearance with a middle parting that sent his black hair in two waves away from each other. He was liked in university, but still looked too young for the corporate world.

‘Is the three-date rule real?’ Iman’s French-Algerian accent always made Yui tingle a little if he hadn’t spoken in a while. The three locals thought for a second.

‘*Kokuhaku*?’ Iori asked for confirmation

‘Yes, that. If you don’t confess your admiration on the third date or something like that. It’s what my friends tell me.’

‘We never told you that, Iman.’ Xavier teased and squeezed Iman’s shoulders.

‘Other friends.’

‘It is not a rule.’ Iori continued. ‘Japanese are very shy, very ... *naikō-tekkitte eigo de nante iu no?*’

‘Introverted.’ Yui offered sipping her beer.

‘Yes, Japanese people are introverted. They do not say what they mean. So *Kokuhaku* lets people know their feelings. You can tell someone

you like them clearly and honestly. Often the third date.'

'Iman, I find your introspection charming and your thirst for knowledge delicious and I think we should become lovers.'

'Shui fear this is the tenth time we've hung out, Xavier. You're too late. I reserve my adoration for another.'

This is how they spent their days. A non-committal flush of alcohol peppered with jests and teasing and sharing of the idiosyncrasies of their cultures. But try as they might, they couldn't really cross the threshold into each other's worlds. How could they, with such intricate histories they'd never shared. They loved each other as a wind loves the sails of a leaving boat.

Yui loved the idea of everyone being a boat, a drifting thing lost in the waves. This was how she thought of others, how she imagined the insides of their chests. There were no organs, just a ribcage and water with a boat in the middle of the tides, trying to get somewhere. She thought then of the gulls waiting on the ferry railings for whatever oily fries were left behind as the ferry docked in Liverpool from Dublin.

Just then Yui was thinking what kind of boat everyone would be, beer washing over her tongue and filling her mouth. *Svea would be a racing yacht. Xavier an aircraft carrier. Seiga an inflatable dingy. Iman a galley.* And Iori? Yui looked at her out of the corner of her eye, sipping beer as a distraction again. She didn't know. Iori said she was a twin and Yui couldn't imagine another version of her moving through the city with indifference and about her. What boat would she be? *Maybe some people were the waves or the clouds. Maybe Dublin made me sentimental.* Yui drifted off into all her *maybes* as the conversation circled dating, love, and sex.

Iori brought Yui back. ‘Karaoke?’ Her sanguine, attractive disposition seemed to pause all the molecules between them.

Yui wasn’t in the mood for a karaoke evening. It meant getting drunker than she intended, but she was caught off guard by the tables excitement and nodded in acceptance before she could think it through. She hated that she was forever trying to please everyone.

Seiga shook his head at Svea. ‘No no, ka-ra-oh-keh.’ Svea cut him with a glance.

‘Are you all ready to weep at the beauty of my voice?’ Xavier lifted out of the booth and issued a theatrical howl that got half the *izakaya* looking at him. Everyone left and Seiga trailed at the back awkwardly bowing in apology to everyone who looked at the boisterous Xavier.

-

Yui still couldn’t believe they had entire buildings dedicated to this pastime. The *Karaokekan* beamed its proud existence in its blue and red neon sign down the length of the building which seemed to descend out of the black sky. The windows were darkened but if you looked carefully, you could make out silhouettes in the soundproof karaoke rooms – Tokyo and its obsession with anonymity. So much living seemed to happen in a quiet, crammed room; from karaoke, to love hotels, to office cubicles, and even houses. There was never enough space to be something more. Yui had never thought of it until she saw the transparency of Dublin, the unashamed living of characters she only ever read of. And now, she couldn’t help but feel that Tokyo was trying to disguise itself.

Yui thought about how karaoke must have started. She imagined an 80’s businessman with a fierce moustache bought out an abandoned hotel

and turned the rooms into soundproofed karaoke booths. Then rented them out for an hour for customers to let out all their internal noise. These rooms were the few places that people got to be as loud as they want and say what they want. Perhaps that was its success; a room in Japan where you didn't have to be Japanese. Everyone was trying to run away from themselves in some way or another and music always unclogged the backlog in our thoughts.

The shadowy windows of the *Karaokekan* looked down at Yui.

'We can start with an hour?' Seiga was nominated to deal with the karaoke clerk.

'Yes, an hour, and if the itch in our throats continues, we can just extend it.' Xavier, taking charge as he often did.

Their room was on the fifth floor. They squeezed into the elevator excitedly, Xavier in the middle back with his arms out like an effigy of a god from somewhere in the Pacific, shielding his followers with carved arms. They passed other rooms, muffled voices and music escaping the spaces between the doors and their frames. Xavier immediately hit the party lights when they entered the room and ordered everyone a drink from the intercom system. A foreigner's Japanese level never mattered when it came to ordering alcohol and it always made Yui laugh to herself. Not that her days were full of expats.

The door was barely closed before Xavier had queued Bohemian Rhapsody. 'The perfect warm up song we can all sing to.' He smiled and started to bounce with the intro of the song, gesturing to the screen with operatic grandeur as the lyrics and a bootleg version of the music video played out. Seiga tried to put his arms around him and join in, but he couldn't get his arm around Xavier's bulky shoulders. Everyone else

l lounged into the couches. Yui took stock of how intoxicated they were, trying to figure out where would be the best place to sit.

Songs came and went. Drinks with them. Glasses collected on the table in the middle of the room, reflecting the changing lights and drunk expressions of their *izakaya* group. Yui refused to sing into a mic, but the discomfort of the close space was easing out of her muscles. It's not that she disliked karaoke, nor was it that she was uncomfortable with the group. Sometimes, she just had a feeling of being in the way, as if her body were not her own and she didn't know where to put it or how to move it. She tried to make it as small as possible. *How terribly Japanese*, she thought of herself.

Xavier sang the most, of course. Iman chose some obscure alternative bands, and some Sakanaction, his favourite Japanese band that got Seiga so hyped Yui thought he was going to kiss Iman.

Iori's song choices were seductive, almost promiscuous. Yui could imagine her in a smoky jazz bar, gripping the eyes of the listener with the way she moved hers. A little out of character to how she was in the learning studio, but what did she really know of Iori, the moody twin. The way she sang and danced silenced the room. Yui wasn't sure if everyone was enchanted or turned on; or if there was much of a difference in this context. The way Iori tilted her head and exposed her neck was so alluring Yui understood why others would offer their throats to demons. When she finished, everyone applauded with the drifting formality of a jazz club.

'Yui, I won't have you not singing.' Xavier turned the mic in his hands.

'No, really, I can't. I'll cause you all such pain.'

'Come on. Let's sing together, something silly. Svea, queue us

something there if you don't mind?

Svea typed some things into the digital tablet that controlled the room and searched for a song with a mischievous expression.

'No, I can't.' The party lights turned red, and Yui felt as if all the blood had been stolen from her to create the effect. 'Seiga will sing with you.' Yui offered him up in her place.

Seiga jumped up triumphantly, with a look of pride.

'No, please, for me?' Xavier dropped his cell on the couch and passed Yui the other mic with a pathetic look on his face intended to persuade. She accepted it and her whole body sighed in disbelief, but, again, she was unable to deny others.

'Yes! Let's do this. Everyone sit back and let Yui and I show you how it's done.' Xavier jumped up with almost the same excitement as Seiga (who looked hurt by his replacement). Xavier adjusted his belt with his heavy hands and invited Yui beside him. Their silhouettes looked comical in the light of the waiting screen, his hulking, hers lanky, both glowing in the impatient menu light. He wiggled his butt and tried a few dance moves his younger students showed him to ease Yui's nerves. She laughed and thought of hitting him with the mic because she'd seen other girls behave like this. She opted to just rotate her body left to right.

Miki Matsubara's *Mayonaka no Doa/Stay With Me* came up on screen. Xavier turned to look at Svea. 'You cheeky Swede. You know I love this song.'

'Good luck reading the Japanese.'

'It's all good.' Xavier playfully nudged Yui with his elbow. 'I got Yui to guide me.' Yui clenched her lips in an awkward smile that just made the room laugh. She was quietly dying inside and could feel her ankles

shaking. If she were in her office heels, she'd have fallen over.

When the song started, Xavier kicked in, snapping his thumb and doing his best 80s backup dancer impression. He tried to match the initial high pitch intro and squeaked out some horrible sounds that got a laugh. Yui couldn't move. The microphone felt like a chain in her hand dragging it to the ground.

The lyrics broke in. Xavier nailed some of the words, sung poorly of course but the pronunciation wasn't bad. After the first two lines, however, it became a jumble of random noises.

'Yui, help, I'm dying out here.' He continued his backup dancer turns and twists. Yui lifted the mic to her lips and the others let out a laughing cheer. She blushed and dropped it to her side again. Looking back at them, wanting to hide in the pocket of her jacket lying on the *karaoke* booth couch.

When the chorus started, everyone chimed in. A catchier chorus could not be found, and they couldn't resist singing along. The sounds of them all together and the mess of it gave Yui a bit of courage and she lifted the mic again, letting out some of the words softly, testing the mic.

Her voice was unremarkable. She hated it. But she continued to sing, thinking maybe these strangers would be a little fonder of her, remember her a little better if she did.

The lights dashed into several colours for the next verse. The synth keyboard and drums combo transported them to an 80s Tokyo with its oversized suits and tuner cars. Yui was almost having fun. Watching Xavier certainly was hilarious. The oaf got so into the song, and everyone loved it, joining in with more fervour for the second chorus. Seiga forgot his sulk and was dancing in the back. Iori bounced her sneaker in time

with the music, her arms outstretched across the sofa. Svea bobbed her blonde hair back and forth, biting her bottom lip with a goofy, cute smile.

Tomorrow, they'd be other people. Partitioned into cubicles and desks. Gulping down the things they really wanted with the tasteless office coffee as the clock ticked in lessons and meetings. But this soundproof room on the fifth floor with its blacked-out windows, vulgar lights, and whiskey leather couches, was an interlude from themselves and their responsibilities, a reminder of the things they abandoned to be what they are. Yui fell in love with each of them as the saxophone solo filled the spaces between them – a pocket love. When they started singing again, she tried to inflect her voice and for a brief second, she thought she sounded pretty.

Xavier's phone lit up on the couch catching his attention, confused as to why he was receiving a text so late. He squinted but couldn't make out what it said, still singing into the microphone and dancing. He dropped to his haunches and read the message. His voice stopped and Yui's voice broke as she heard it from the speakers alone. It grew quieter but she continued, looking to her duet partner for his return, her confidence rushing out of her.

Xavier lowered the mic onto the floor and dropped his head. Everyone looked at each other for a clue as to what was happening, then to Xavier for the answer. Yui stopped singing. The song continued dumbly in the back. Xavier excused himself and left the room, the words, *stay with me*, falling like a heavy cloud to the floor as the song ended.

Iori and Yui left the karaoke booth to check what had caused such an uncharacteristic response. They searched the floor they were on and the safety staircase in the back but found nothing. Iori offered to check outside

and Yui the emergency staircase in the back. But again, Yui found nothing. The emergency door closed behind her, and she walked to the end of the passage of karaoke booths. She cupped her hands around her eyes and looked through the tinted glass. Iori was walking towards a figure by the road some seven floors below.

An orange glow coloured the night sky on the other side of an empty lot. Xavier's sneakers were half on the curb. He tried to focus on balancing, looking across the lot to the rusting sky framing what looked like an apartment building.

'I think there's a fire in that building.' Xavier didn't look at Iori as she approached him.

There was no screaming, nor any sirens, or any other indication that flames were charring buildings across the way, but there was something about the light that made it look irreverent, almost unnatural in a backdrop where unnatural things erased everything that wasn't. A flash of blue disturbed the orange, and then a single wail of a siren. Xavier thought of the flames raging in doorframes, how such colours could only be made from destruction.

'When I was in high school, a classmate burnt to death in his bedroom.' Xavier started. 'Whenever I see a fire, I think of him asleep. And then of him unconscious from the smoke. And then a burnt corpse. How does someone become a corpse?'

'I don't know.' The orange glow expanded into the night sky and a feeling of helplessness set into Iori.

'The week before, I asked to use one of his pencils for a math paper. Then he died. But I still had the pencil, kept it with the other random accumulation of stationery in my pockets. I couldn't use it after he was

gone. I couldn't write or draw or scribble. Then one day the pencil went missing and everything about that boy was lost to me. All I remember is his name. Wesley.'

The traffic light changed, and cars collected in a chain of metal down the road. Another siren ebbed into the city. A voice on a bullhorn followed it issuing some calm, almost robotic instructions.

'I sometimes wonder if anyone blames themselves for his death. How could you not? An exposed wire, or something ridiculous like that, killing someone. Would you blame yourself?'

Iori tried to swallow the dryness out of her mouth. 'I don't know. Maybe his parents blame themselves.'

'If anyone I loved died, I would blame myself. It would be my fault.'

'How could you say that?'

'Because I am supposed to protect them.' Xavier looked at Iori.

'Because it would be my fault.'

The sirens filled the spaces of the night dragging with it tones of orange and red across the overarching black. 'It would be my fault.' Xavier looked away from Iori. Everything around his curved spine shook and he sniffed. 'Wouldn't it?'

Iori moved closer. She wanted to touch him, to console whatever was wrong, whatever he read in that text. But all she could do was balance herself on the curb, as he was. 'What is your fault?'

The air was dry and dead, tasteless to the lungs. Xavier signalled to a taxi driving up the road. Somewhere in the distance the flames blackened the wallpaper of someone's room.

'Wait, Xavier, where are you going?' He didn't say anything. He didn't even turn around to look at Iori. She jumped up and took his hand.

‘Please I want to help. Tell me what happened. Let me help you.’

The taxi stopped next to them. The driver looked distinguished, a suit and gloves to match his serious expression, evidence of the night shift in the bags under his eyes. Xavier opened the door.

‘Xavier, please, wait.’ He turned to look at her. All at once, he became haggard, aged. Lines burrowed out of his eyes. The orange glow of the fire framed him and made all his features look darker and somehow further away.

‘There is a love hotel on the other side of the station.’ Iori clung tighter to his hand. ‘Take me there. Let me help. You can fuck me and talk to me.’

Xavier pulled his hand out of hers and, took a 10,000 yen note of his pocket and gave it to her. ‘Tell everyone I say thank you for the evening and that I am sorry.’

‘Xavier, please.’

The door closed. The traffic light changed. And then, the street was empty. A single, anguished cry issued out of the darkening orange, like something was lost.

-

The following Monday, Ms. Itō notified everyone that Xavier’s sister had passed away and that he’d be returning to New York. The cause of her death was not given, and stories were crafted to explain how things ended out of nowhere. A week after that, Iori gave her notice. The *izakaya* group didn’t meet for a month and, slowly, the connections faded out and

the group disbanded.

Seiga continued to be his goofy self, but after some time passed and the others grew distant, he began to doubt himself and apologized after a joke, retreating into other thoughts. Svea transferred to a learning studio one of her friends worked at and Iman got so caught up in his Japanese studies that when he wasn't working, he pressed his nose into the pages of textbooks, until his nose flattened.

Without Xavier to glue them all together, everything fell apart. He was one of those enchanting people that made you feel like you were worth something. To Yui, there was something in him that reminded her of that same vigour Rika has, that someone wants to touch every corner of life and make it lighter. That his sister died, that someone like Xavier wasn't safe from the cruel randomness of things gave Yui such an intense nausea when she thought of it that her appetite vanished and for a day she'd revoke living, perhaps as Ryota does. She was left with something like a hangover, the cost of overindulging in the romance of fleeting friendships.

Yui felt as though something was taken from her. As days clocked over, she became more and more invisible to the *izakaya* group as they slowly fell off into other corners of the city, and all the newcomers in the learning studio made no efforts to get to know her. When she wore one of her white office blouses, she felt like she was a fixture that hung unnoticed on the white wall behind the front desk. If you asked, most people would say black is the loneliest colour; the dark, death, blindness. But all the colours were there, absorbed, and hidden.

To her, white was lonelier; it reflected everything, hid nothing. It left no impression and residual emotion on anyone who looked at it. Bodies were buried in white linen, the bones of *kotsuage* rituals were white,

ghosts were white. Perhaps Xavier's sister would be buried in a white dress, paling in her wooden box.

Everything that happened to Yui, all the divisions of being half-Japanese, half something else, left her doused in white. Sitting there in that office, she wasn't anything but an absence, a forgettable, empty space. She tugged at her white blouse, trying to breathe.

Almost a year had passed since she returned to the aquarium and she jumped into the harbour waters with Rika. When Yui and Rika spoke on the phone that evening, she wanted to ask Rika what was wrong – if there was something – she wanted to ask Rika if she would be honest if she wasn't okay, but she didn't know how to express these feelings. She didn't know how to make it sound not foolish. How much of her time did she spend thinking of ways to express those inexpressible things in her, only for it to never come out.

'So, you'll come then? Saturday morning?'

Rika asked if she could photograph Yui and add the images to her portfolio. More than apprehensive to be a subject in Rika's photographs, Yui searched for an excuse, but she couldn't find anything suitable.

'Must I bring any special to wear?'

'No, I'll take care of everything.' There was a pause on the line. 'Eeeeeeh, it's going to be amazing. Don't back out, okay? Can't have you disappearing on me again.'

'I'll try.'

-

Yui turned in her bed, the Saturday morning light falling through her blinds in lines across the shape of the duvet over her body. Though Rika

had persuaded her to be in her photographs, Yui detested the idea and regretted agreeing to it. She practiced polite declining phrases bed as if she were learning them for the first time. Her legs felt weak, and she just wanted to lie in bed all day and listen to her grandmother tend to the garden outside or distract her thoughts with some silly television programs she couldn't stop rewatching.

Three notifications from Rika glowed on her smartphone screen, and Yui imagined letting out a sitcom-esque groan, but remained quiet. She pulled the pillow she holds when she sleeps tighter into her chest. Saturdays in Dublin were for early café visits, pastries, a coffee, and then a walk through Phoenix Park to see how close she could get to the deer. They reminded her of the deer in Nara, just less tame, less robotic.

‘Yu-chan, tea is ready.’

Yui thought of groaning again. She buried her face in her pillow quietly, then got up, slippers on, and went down to join her grandmother.

-

‘*Hello, secretary lady.*’ Rika was beaming at her friend at the station gates and hugged her around the neck.

‘Again, with the English? And I am not a secretary. Closer to a counsellor for the students.’ Yui hugged back but with only one arm.

‘Excuse me, miss counsellor. *I am very sorry for the misunderstanding.*’

‘Can we just get this over and done with? Don't forget you promised me beer after.’

Rika laughed at her friend's efforts to disguise her nervousness with a grumpy, indifferent mask. It gave her a seriousness that was both alluring

and intimidating. Though Yui never thought of herself as intimidating. Rika lifted the heavy bag she brought with her and the two of them left Ueno station.

‘Clothing. Different outfits.’ Rika answered Yui’s quizzical expression.

‘What’s wrong with what I am wearing?’

‘Please, please Yui, I am a professional, let me work.’

Yui was surprised at the un-Japanese sarcastic tone. Things had changed in her friend, or perhaps just found channels through which to become real. Both of their latent identities had snuck out of the corners of them, and they were getting to know the new aspects of each other’s personalities. To Yui, Rika felt like a limb that went missing and was then restored with a nerve or two reconnected in the wrong place, making her feel foreign. Pre-Dublin Yui would have been unsettled, but she knew how different she must have seemed and reasoned that this was the logical trajectory of their identities, as if logical could explain the vague ebb of emotions in them both.

They bought some coffee, silently people-watching as they waited in the queue of university girls texting and checking their appearance in the cameras of their smartphones. Rika would make a quiet gesture to Yui at a girl with strange makeup and the two of them would try not to laugh. The wait weakened Yui’s resolve and what little enthusiasm she had for the photoshoot, if any, was discarded with their receipt into the trash can. She wanted to climb into the hole of the coffee cup lid and hide there, floating in the creamy coffee.

Rika took her to the less visited part of Ueno Park, passed the stone lanterns of the *Toshogu* shrine to the north-eastern entrance, a staircase that

overlooked the steel bridge to the reptile and amphibian section of the Ueno zoo.

‘You ready?’

‘Absolutely not.’ This was the first time Rika saw her smile all morning. The sides of Yui’s hair were tied up at the back and draped down over her the rest of her hair. The darkness of it looked as if it had taken its colour from the underworld and was, perhaps, the only overtly Japanese feature in Yui, the rest of her hinted at her halfness. Rika tried to imagine how she might frame Yui’s metallic face, how the light should fall on her. She observed the treeline, and the figures of light falling through the leaves. Yui wore a loose jumper that hung on her like a cloud falling off a rockface, the sleeves dangling passed her fingers against her jeans.

‘You look good, Yui.’ Rika’s voice faltered a little.

‘*Thank you, dork.*’

‘Ehh? What did you call me?’

Yui had never been more terrified of a camera. The lens looked venomous, destructive almost, incongruent in the delicate hands of her friend. Yui trusted Rika, but with the lens in her hand other mistrusting feelings snuck into her thoughts. The cloudy morning gave the day a moody feel, but the lighting was far from dull. Rika’s instructions to Yui were to walk, slowly and naturally up the stairs, something Yui completely forgot how to do when the camera was pointing at her. Walking had never felt so strange, and the poor girl was blushing like an imbecile stumbling up the stairs, beads of sweat falling down her spine in an anxious flush of heat.

‘Okay, let’s try a different kind of natural.’ Rika couldn’t help laughing at her friend. Yui puffed up her cheeks and threw a handful of

leaves at Rika. They didn't reach her, and Rika laughed a little more.

'Think of something, a memory if you want. Sad memory if you want to look broody and hot, a happy memory if you want to look playful and idyllic.' Turning 360 degrees, 'but also still hot.'

'What do I think about if I want to go home and hide for a week.' Yui would be lying to herself if she said her mood wasn't lifting with each photograph taken, and each of Rika's contagious giggles.

'Think of the beer at the end of the day, alcoholic.'

'Can you just warn me when someone comes passed. I keep getting a fright and feeling ridiculous when they see me like this.'

Just then an elder gentleman with his hands behind his back and crooked knees lifted himself up the stairs to the shrine. Yui and Rika waited for what felt like ages and when he was out of earshot the two of them cringed at how long it took him to pass, laughing when they could. They continued.

'Yes, very good. A talent, you have, little Yui.' Rika, again with her over the top high-class voice. 'Location and outfit change. Prepare the set boys.' She turned her hand in the air, ordering some imaginary set hands around.

'Where am I supposed to change, Rika? There're people everywhere.'

The bathrooms on the periphery of the *Shinobazu no Ike* Pond stank of piss and pools of rainwater. Rika leaned against the door of the stall Yui was shuffling around in, trying to get her friends clothing on. The lock was broken and the room not very concealed with its large openings on either side of the structure – it wasn't quite a building.

'I hate you.' Yui's defeated voice bounced off the door.

‘I love you too, Yu-chan.’

A businesswoman entered the bathroom imperiously, walked into the stall next to Yui and proceeded to vomit. The sounds made Yui pause and Rika push her lips together restraining another laugh. She adored how much they laughed together. The woman left the stall and composed herself in the mirror elegantly, with grace almost, dabbing the sides of her lips and reapplying her lipstick. She nodded her head to Rika in the reflection, Rika’s camera still hanging around her neck, and left.

‘What’s taking so long?’

Yui loudly exhaled through her nose. ‘You are tiny, okay, I am trying my best.’ Yui lost her footing and hit the door with her palm, knocking Rika forward.

‘Ouch, no need to get violent.’

Rika turned. Through a parting in the door she saw Yui, nothing but jeans, her shoulders rotating under her skin as she corrected the folds of the jeans. Rika froze. About to say something, she stopped herself and watched Yui’s arms fall to her sides, the curves of her breast and nipple becoming visible in the white bathroom light. This wasn’t the first time she’d seen her friend undressed, but something about this was different, all those years made something of a stranger out of Yui. Rika felt like she was invading her privacy for the first time since they met after their baseball trials together in elementary school.

Yui ran her fingers through her hair, clearing her profile of her black waves, save for some strings hanging over her fringe. Looking down at the clothing thrown about the cubicle, she looked playful, but with a natural sadness on the account of her metallic, angular features – like something about her composition made it impossible for her to express anything more

than a subtle happiness.

A shift in the light caught Yui's attention and she turned to find Rika looking at her. They made eye contact but said nothing, expressionless, both their chests tensing around their hearts. Rika thought Yui would withdraw or shut the door with an exhalation of embarrassment, but she didn't. She remembered all the comments she'd received about her mixed-Japanese body in the changing rooms, comments given without the intention of harm, but were enough to cause her to dislike her body. The colours of those embarrassing memories washed through her now, as a subdued version of those feelings flowed through her.

Yui looked down at her body, her thin unremarkable belly, the pink nipples that were rounder and protruded less than other Japanese girls. She covered them with her arm, and with a shameful sadness. Then closed the door.

Both embarrassed and terribly awkward, Rika looked to the openings of the structure to see if anyone had seen her friend, then pressed her fingers into her forehead and made an embarrassed sigh that accidentally came out of her.

Then the door opened again.

'Take a photograph.'

'What?' Yui was still half undressed.

'Take it.'

Rika felt everything in her fall into a part of her she didn't know existed. Shock and shyness and something she didn't understand electrified her nerves.

'No, I can't. Why?'

'Please.' Yui's eyes invited chaos

Rika lifted the camera. She couldn't focus. The scene was closer to a dream than anything and everything started to go blurry.

'Take it.'

Rika pressed the capture button and the shutter closed.

Yui put her hands on the frame of the door parallel to the dirty ground and tried to pose, her arms supporting her against the frame. Rika looked away at the entrances to make sure no one is coming.

'Ehhhh, this is crazy. Are you sure?' But all she got in response was a diminished shrug. The bathroom light flickered and Yui looked up, turning her body to face Rika, her toes against the dark bricks of the bathroom floor. Rika continued to photograph, pausing to adjust settings and angles. Yui pushed the door open, blushing as she unfastened the buttons of her trousers and let them hang open, revealing her very ordinary white underwear.

Something about the ugliness of the bathroom, its coarse dark mundanity, and the lit, otherness of Yui's flesh, gave the images their meaning. Rika adored the vulnerability, the almost pathetic image of a girl in so disordered a toilet, clothing lying about. She'd never photographed anything like it before. After the initial terror, a touch of excitement ran through her mixed most confusingly with sadness – the tragi-erotic image of Yui, undoing herself in the filth.

A lady entered the bathroom and in a confused fluster, left again as Yui closed the door and held it closed, her heart now racing at the reality of what just happened. She felt Rika's weight against the other side of the door and rested hers against it. They didn't say a word to each other. Voices and cars passed by idly outside and the day returned to its normal rotations.

‘Delete them.’

Rika previewed the images scrolling through them.

‘Delete them, Rika.’

‘I can’t.’ The door holding their backs felt thinner, like it would crumble, and they’d fall into each other.

‘Please, Rika.’

‘Yui, they are gorgeous. Wait. Let me show you.’

‘Delete them.’ This time with more anger, almost desperate.

Rika said nothing and felt Yui lift off the door, shuffling punctuated with sniffing as Yui dressed. Rika got up and waited for her friend. But Yui exited the bathroom as though her friend did not exist, tears down her cheeks and Rika’s bag bumping into her legs.

‘Yui, wait please.’ She followed her, almost running beside the *Shinobazu no Ike* Pond, the lotus leaves turning away at the distraught girl who moved towards the temple in the middle of the pond.

‘Yui, wait. Talk to me.’

An early Saturday crowd moved up and down the pathway between the swan paddle boat station and the back of the incensed temple. Yui was not as desensitized to the number of people as she used to be, and the faces caught her attention in a worried look-about to see who noticed her tears and red eyes. She rubbed them with the sleeves of her jumper and tried to hide what she was feeling from all those brief glances.

A jogger ran passed staring, covered in sweat. An old man with knobby hands stopped and turned in synchronicity with the upset girl moving through the crowds, and her following, guilty friend. He made a scoffed comment to his wife that Yui missed.

She felt the whole city had seen her in that cubicle. They all knew.

They knew she was disgusting, allowing her friend to photograph her undressed. She slowed, unable to decide in which direction to continue, Rika's bag hanging dumbly at her knees.

Rika caught up to her, and hugged her, almost fell on her. Yui felt her wet cheeks.

'I am sorry.'

'They're going to know. Everyone is going to see me like that.' Yui stammered her words out in the wake of her emotions. 'Delete them, please.' Rika didn't let go and waited for her friend to calm and return her hug. She did, of course, unable to resist Rika's warmth. 'They are going to know.' Her breath broke. 'They are going to know. They're going to know I don't belong here.'

'Come with me.' Rika took her hand.

-

The restaurant looked like a stage set and all that Rika and Yui heard was the clinking of knives and forks. They didn't know what to say to each other. Tea fumes floated up from the table and blurred the other's image, not that they were looking at each other. Rika ordered them tea and pancakes when they arrived, knowing it would help, somehow. She wasn't quite sure how yet.

Both of their cheeks were full of the fluffy goodness seconds after the pancakes arrived. The softness of the pancakes fixed the holes in them, in their stomachs and in the anxiety that perforated what was to be a fun goofy photo session for Rika to practice and Yui to take her mind off things.

Yui chose cream with her pancake and Rika ice-cream, and they spilt

their choosing across each other's plates without asking, as they used to do when they were children. Rika wasn't sure how to approach the subject, how to persuade her friend to let her keep some of those photographs.

Rika brought the images up on her camera and passed it to Yui, both still chewing on pancakes.

'You can delete them, if you want, but please look at them first.'

The camera felt cold in her hands. The buttons unwelcoming. But Yui viewed the pictures, careful to cover the screen with her other hand in the corner booth of the cafe. Without any hints of a response or feelings to the images, she turned the camera off and passed it back to Rika without deleting a single image. Rika, curious to ask why, zipped the camera bag closed and said nothing.

'Will you send them to me?'

'Yes, of course.' Rika warmed the space between them with her smile.

There was a look of exhaustion in Yui's expression, a desensitized exhaustion without an object, without direction. This girl returned a foreigner to her home and though she knew the language, she knew other things which made her as unknowable as a barefoot, topless stranger in someone else's photograph. Was it wrong for Rika to want her old friend back? Knowing that they'd both never be who they were again. Yui broke the silence.

'I am sorry. I just wanted someone to see me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Forget it.' Yui wiped some cream off her lips and looked out the glass wall. Groups of idle faces waited for the traffic light to change. 'Do you want to go see a movie?'

-

When Yui arrived home after the film, her grandmother was waiting for her in her impression in the couch with Tora and Jiji, the cats Mrs. Nishikawa got after Yui left for Dublin. They were curled lazily over each other.

‘Welcome home!’ Mrs. Nishikawa rang from her bell-belly through the doorframe. ‘What did you get up to, Little?’

‘With Rika.’ Yui kicked her shoes off.

‘Dinner’s ready for us. Come, come.’ Tora and Jiji were disgruntled by the disturbance of their comfort when Mrs. Nishikawa got up.

‘I am not hungry. You go ahead, I’ll eat later, thank you.’

Before Yui could disappear upstairs, her grandmother asked her another three times to join her and, in the end, said there was something she wanted to talk about with Yui.

‘Can it wait?’ Yui was in the doorframe.

Mrs. Nishikawa tried to find her words and rubbed her hands together.

‘Yu-chan, this conversation school job of yours. Don’t you think it’s a waste of time?’

‘We can’t both live off of your pension, Gran.’

‘Yes, but maybe it isn’t the best option for you. There isn’t much progression, right? Do you want to be a counsellor forever?’

Yui didn’t reply.

‘Perhaps something in corporate, where you can become a manager one day. Wouldn’t that be better, Little?’

‘Can we talk about this tomorrow?’ Yui folded her arms around her

chest, looking away.

‘Yes of course. Will you think about it for me? You know you could do anything you wanted.’

Yui tried to squeeze her clothing into her.

‘I just worry about you. Your mother was always so vacant. I don’t want that to happen to you.’ She paused. ‘I want you to make something of yourself, that’s all.’

‘Is this not enough, Gran?’ Yui’s throat tensed around her words. A clot of anger cut off her oxygen and before she could control her body she started to cry. ‘Is it not enough to be a counsellor, to help others learn a language so they can visit other cities like I did? Because they feel what I feel.’

Mrs. Nishikawa raised her hand to comfort her granddaughter. ‘Yuchan, that’s not what I meant. It’s just that you seem ...’

‘Like her? Like my mom? Like half of me isn’t here? Well, it isn’t. It wasn’t. I can’t make myself into the something you want, as much as I want to. As much as I’ve tried. I didn’t ask to be made this half thing.’

Yui paused, the rage in her softening into sorrow. ‘I’m trying so hard to make this place feel like home, but I can’t help but feel I don’t belong here, Gran. I don’t belong here. And I don’t belong there either.’ Yui used whatever part of her brain wasn’t flooded with emotion to hold herself up, trying not to collapse with the waves of disordered feelings. ‘What if this is all I will ever be?’

Yui turned and carried herself to her room, her grandmother’s hand left dumbly in the air, still reaching out for her.

After she’d calmed down and heard her grandmother retreat to her room, Yui lifted her duvet off of her and looked out the window. Her usual

haunt for an evening of thinking through the viscosity of a reasonless sadness. Sadness that couldn't be explained or talked away. A vacancy under a streetlight reminded her of the alley outside the gallery where she gave blocks of cheesecake to that foreign couple. She remembered how out of place they looked, like thorns disturbing the flat, unraised surface of Tokyo. She felt herself a thorn, sympathized with them, maybe even admired them. She knew that those who left their homes and didn't want to return, ached for something more and couldn't find it in the dull hues of home. She wondered where they came from and what gave them cause to leave.

Closing her eyes, Yui imagined pulling the bowstring of her *kyūdō* bow back and releasing the arrow into the lamp of the streetlight. Would the arrow damage the bulb? She slowly performed the actions without a bow, trying to calm the chaos in her chest with the discipline she practiced for years when she was in high school. She released and the light brightened before dying out and casting those foreigners in darkness. She couldn't remember their names. That was five months ago. The June rains had come and gone.

Nothing eased Yui's emotions. The memory of the day caused them to bounce around the cavity in her chest. She tried not to remember; to forget the way her friend adored being behind the camera photographing her on the Ueno steps; the outfit she chose for the next shoot; the photos of her in the bathroom and the rush of panic that followed. Why had she chosen not to delete them? Nothing good could come from it and parts of her regretted it. But another part of her didn't. Another part of her wanted to orchestrate her own destruction.

Around midnight, autonomy returned to her. She felt embarrassed by

how she sulked, how she cried and said what she did to her grandmother. The boring chore of maintaining her body would have to be enough to distract her from the thoughts. She removed the little bit of makeup she wore, tying her hair up and brushing her teeth. All the while thinking of those photographs and how she let the girl she grew up with look at her like that, how her eyes almost touched the curves of her breasts, the fall of her hair over her shoulders – and how she liked the feeling. The bathroom was steamy with the warmth of the shower. Music played from her the little speaker on her phone as she jumped in and closed the glass behind her.

The warmth of the water covered her body. Yui just let it fall over her. But thoughts of Rika's lens infiltrated the steam. Images of herself undressed, afraid, vulnerable, but with something vicious in her expression, a subtle fury that made her look at home in the unbecoming cubicle. Without realizing it, Yui was holding the showerhead between her thighs. The gentle hints of pleasure relaxed all the anxiety in her. She leaned back against the tiles of the shower. The steam cloaked her, made her feel invisible, ghostly, half there and half in that photograph – Rika's eyes locked on her, above her blushing cheeks and the unblinking lens of the camera. She placed her other hand over her breast and lightly squeezed, closing her hand over her nipple. The jets of water were like soft needles, injecting her with chemicals that made her body feel vaporous and full of heat. Sightless, she imagined Rika's eyes on her. The blush in her cheeks as she looked at every inch of Yui's body. And then her eyes. Yui's slate-blue, unforgiving eyes in Rika's brown, nostalgic eyes. Yui's thighs tensed. Her knees gave in. Heat rushed to her skull, and she collapsed down the wall of the shower, orgasm and guilt releasing down

her thighs to her ankles.

The music became audible again. Yui wiped her eyes. Then scrubbed her body until her skin was red.

Chapter 4 – Sulphur

The acute noise of a vacuum cleaner brought Charlie out of sleep. The left side of his head was in pain, the side he'd been sleeping on. His mouth was dry. His tongue shrivelled as though it were jarred in beer for a month. It was one of those mornings when you woke without orientation or knowing where you were or how you got there. Charlie rose and tried to look out his window, then remembered he was in a hotel, a love hotel, unofficially or officially he wasn't sure. He dropped back down and let the discomfort of the hangover cloud his head.

After a minute of just lying there, he checked the time on his phone. 6:37. What a wretched time to be vacuuming. But, then again, who was at a third-rate hotel at this hour on a Tuesday morning. He rolled over dramatically, as though the next movement might kill him and took in the appalling brown of the carpets. Not at all romantic. They were coarse to boot. Charlie ran cold water over his head in the bathroom basin, hoping the cold would shock his system awake. All it did was temporarily drown out the vacuum cleaner and make his cheeks red.

The evening before was a wrap party for some ridiculous *Morinaga In* jelly drink advertisement. They filmed an over-the-top comedy sketch about a businessman being revived from exhaustion on the morning train with the jelly. Ryota and him stayed in contact after the lining compound search and because Charlie's art was not selling as successfully as he hoped, and the cash he had saved, though still okay, was depleting, Ryota got him onto some productions with him as a gaffer. He carried things around mostly, but would help out quite a bit with the art department and was hoping to slowly transition to art. The work was decent enough, he

enjoyed the physicality of it and when he wasn't needed, he studied Japanese or doodled people on set.

How much they drank last night could only be considered criminal. What was it in people that urged them to such self-destruction? Charlie often lamented how socializing for him almost always came with drinking. Was it him, or society that craved intoxication? It's not that he disliked it, it was just that it was always there, and he would've liked to find other ways to entertain himself without dropping himself into drunkenness.

He missed his last train by more than hour and a taxi home was three times the price of the love hotel near the station. The receptionist was a little confused to find a foreigner alone at that hour. It was not uncommon for someone to get a room by themselves, but it was a Japanese thing, the routines of business after hours of overworking. The receptionist tried to disguise his confusion with politeness but couldn't take his eyes off Charlie, trying to assess who or what this person was.

A couple arrived behind Charlie halfway through the transaction of his room booking. The gentleman was greying on the sides, distinguished in the way he carried himself despite the late hour. The girl looked half his age, but not nervous. Rather, she gave off the air of rebelliousness, as though her teenage years were dotted with episodes of running away from home. Together they made an attractive couple but not something Charlie was used to seeing back home, nor in the hours of the day here in Tokyo.

They approached the reception and when the gentleman noticed Charlie, he said something to the girl who then waited in the middle of the lobby, trying to look innocent. The gentleman moved forward and waited behind Charlie.

'Please enjoy your stay with us.' The receptionist bowed as he

presented the keycard to Charlie who took and turned for the elevator. The waiting gentleman looked forward almost murderously. He sniffed his cavernous nostrils but acted as if Charlie did not exist.

The elevator door was about to close when, to Charlie's fright, the girl entered through the opening. Charlie looked up and then away, trying to ignore her and dump the intoxication out of his skull. The elevator ride became desperately uncomfortable very quickly. She just looked at him, continued to face him, failed to turn around and face the exit as was protocol. Charlie looked at her again and tried to smile, but she just continued to study him. Exhaustion stopped him from intervening, and he looked up into the steel of the elevator.

She was young even for Charlie. There was a fakeness about her, as if her face was designed and crafted out of plastic. Her outfit was more cosplay than clothing, as if she'd just exited a screen to visit the real world and fuck someone who could be her father. She looked at Charlie like he was an alien, like she was going to kill him, probe his corpse and then eat him. All Charlie felt, however, was the overwhelming mass of sleeplessness.

Exiting the elevator, Charlie accidentally brushed the girl's arm with his. He apologized, but she just turned with him and followed him with her expressionless, gloss eyes, tilting her head.

Nothing about the corridor was extraordinary, a cut and paste passage from almost all hotels, but something about it made it seem more damp, moist almost, like the sweat and fluids of lovers soaked into the building. Or it was Charlie's head that was a mush of wetness. A couple in one of the rooms were moaning. Audibly. To Charlie's surprise. Reading the numbers of the rooms, other voices became apparent. A soft voice

from room 311. An instruction and excited acceptance from room 327. Quiet laughter from 329. Charlie tried to imagine what they were doing, what they looked like, but the impersonality of, and numbers on the doors stripped them of their faces. All he could picture were faceless bodies made to fuck until they vanished.

Room 331. He pushed the keycard in and looked back at the elevator. The girl was there, waiting in front of the closed elevator doors watching him. Charlie paused a second and then went inside. Closing the door of room 331, he felt himself disappear into the anonymity of a hotel but the strangeness of the girl in the elevator was lingered and reminded him of the oddity of the city. A part of him wanted her to follow him into his room. Then, after almost falling over the luggage stand, he was happy she did not. He paused and inhaled. The only thing he could hear, was the moaning from down the hall and it flooded his skull.

Charlie didn't take much of the room in. He undressed, searched for some pornography to watch but found nothing he liked in the hotel's system and turned the monitor off. Opting for a smut story, he chose one randomly and tried to read it, but the letters on his phone screen were blurry. He masturbated to the sound of the moaning of the couple, orgasmed, and passed out to the sound of the devil laughing in his head.

Lying there the next morning after running cold water over his skull, he thought about all the things that had been done in the room. What violence or love played out secretly here? What gorgeous or hideous collection of flesh interlocked in this room? He remembered the girl from the elevator and thought about what things she would've asked him to do to her, what made her follow him. Nausea turned in his belly imagining her plastic numbness dressing in front of him before leaving without a

word – the dull emptying of loneliness setting into his body. He just lay there, sick, convinced he could feel pillow microbes and bacteria writhing on his cheek.

The room somehow felt bigger, emptier. The spare, unused pillow on the other side of the bed was like a rock in his chest that weighed him down into the mattress. Tagg's leaving almost a year ago left him detached and uninterested in anything more than the deranged interval of fucking – the madness of impersonal orgasms. The connections he had since were brief and unemotional. And, as the days passed, Lüderitz, Johannesburg, and Tokyo all felt terribly far away. He felt then that that room should be his prison, that he should die in that bed for leaving home, for thinking there was more out there than the desperate grasping of things.

-

The day was dull outside. Cloudy and threatening rain. The shower couldn't remove the stink of booze from his clothing. He bought a *pocari sweat* and two bottles of water from the vending machine outside the hotel. Downing the *pocari*, he took stock of the city around him, animating into business and doctor's appointments and meetings and important phone calls and assignments. All that weight of living.

'*Excuse me.*' A paper voice spoke from around the corner. Charlie looked around confused, drops of *pocari* falling off his lips. '*Excuse me.*' The voice repeated and Charlie looked around the corner into the alley. A diminished frame of a body was struggling to hold itself up on the tarlike ends of the hotel. Charlie wiped his mouth and waited for the anaemic figure to speak again.

'*I live alone, just over there.*' He failed to point. '*There's no one there, and I am ill.*' Charlie closed the empty bottle and just then noticed

the man was in sleepwear and looked older than he was. He could barely keep his eyes open in the light of the morning, his papery skin folding down from his eyes into his cheeks. *'Please.'*

That was all he said. And when Charlie failed to react, he repeated, trying to fill the words with something. *'Please.'*

'Do you want some water?' Charlie offered the second bottle of water he purchased. But the man just looked at him, closed his eyes and then collapsed.

Charlie panicked and the fumes of the hangover evaporated. He searched the emergency numbers, called for an ambulance, and waited as it rang, looking around for someone to save the mass of pallid limbs in front of him. No one stopped to help. When the operator answered, Charlie didn't understand a word they said, panic electrifying his nerves. He looked up at the sign of the hotel and read it out loud to the operator and then said *help*. More questions were asked, and the sounds just emptied themselves in Charlie's ear. He repeated the name of the hotel and *help* and then hung up.

Doubling checking no one was looking Charlie started off to the station, fearing that waiting with the passed-out recluse would cause problems. Then turned around and left the second bottle of water next to the unconscious body before rushing off again.

At the station, he put in the earphones he always carried with him and tried to quiet the alarm of the stranger collapsing in front of him with music. Charlie's hangover returned and stripped the world of its illusions. Like exposed nerve endings, meaningless throbbed out of the little movements of others. It was all rather pathetic. Nothing more so than a man standing outside a love hotel on a Tuesday with nowhere to be, no

urgent matter to attend to, and unable to help someone who was desperately ill.

What was wrong with him? The body looked like that of a shut-in, what he learnt was called *hikkikomori* and Charlie wondered if the body made itself ill by hiding from the world, by withdrawing as if his ascetism, his suffering would be rewarded. Seeing the infirm and frailty of the body made Charlie's body ache and he wanted to submerge himself in water. Warm water, an *onsen* perhaps. With nothing else to do, he thought he'd restore his body in a Hakone *onsen* and try, he wasn't sure how, to be better than he was.

Verzache's *I Don't Wanna Be Nothing* blocked all the sounds of the world out, giving Charlie's train ride a cinematic feel. It wasn't of course, just a hungover fool sitting on the end of the row of seats because everyone always left a seat open beside him – the *gaijin* seat, is what the foreigners jokingly called it.

Three years in, and he was still a foreigner to Tokyo. The cloudy city passed by in the windows across from him. *Iidabashi*, then *Suidobashi*, then *Ochanomizu* – the ghosts of previous visits hiding in the scene. He got off at *Ryogoku* and walked the rest of the way home, passed the Sumo arena, the Hokusai Museum and the numerous *combinis* he frequented for microwave meals.

A second shower and diminished breakfast later, Charlie boarded the train going in the direction of Hakone.

-

The train was crowded with its morning freight of bodies. A bunch of schoolboys with baseball equipment exchanged seats and ideas. Two high school girls looked out the window listlessly waiting for the day to

become a series of tasks and tests. A lady covered in wrinkles held on to her shopping caddy and looked about the carriage like it was the first time she was seeing everything. A round hat covered her a face that looked as though it were locked into a permanent smile, chiselled into her hard features. A middle-aged suit and tie turned through a pornographic magazine without a care in the world. The mother and child next to him indifferently turned their back as he leafed through the bodies of young girls.

The halfmoon handles moved in synchrony as the train turned down its tracks. Charlie lined them up to form a tunnel, closing his one eye to line them up in his view. The perspective it created reminded him that he should be painting. He took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the buildings outside the window as they came into view and left.

The film set jobs stole his painting hours. Perhaps stole was the wrong word, for Charlie was disenchanted with art. He gave the hours up willingly, almost with relief. Nothing moved him, nothing he created brought him to some emotional catharsis. No tears or bouts of inspired madness. All the things he imagined about painting were nonsense. Maybe he had nothing to say.

Art was supposed to say something. That's what the textbooks told him, and the aged professors with their unkempt facial hair and questionable relationships. All Charlie achieved, however, was an attempt at making things pretty, to take a scene and try to make it more beautiful than it was. Sometimes it worked, most of the time, it just lost its reality. Viewers looked briefly at the dreamlike quality of his work and turned away, because the world didn't spend its time dreaming anymore.

He thought maybe that beauty had to be earned. That art first had to

be grotesque, hideous, brimming with the mucus of reality before it could become beautiful. What was the price of good art? He'd cut his fingers to be good, his thighs. He'd change his name, his hair, his face. But he'd not change what he thought art was to be, where it was supposed to lie – in that wordless space between the abject and the sublime where tragedy made its home. If art asked a price of its creator, was his loneliness not enough?

Again, the trajectory of his thoughts ended in a fog. The world waved it away.

A plump toddler standing with his mother dropped his plushie as the train turned and it rolled to Charlie's sneakers. It was a cute, round polar bear without an expression and soft, pink inner ears. Dropping to his haunches, Charlie picked it up and smiled at how squishy it was before excusing himself as he made his way to the boy and gave it back to him. His mother's face flushed with embarrassment for some reason and she apologized and thanked Charlie several times. The boy, his mouth open in a round look of a confusion, pushed the plushie into his cheek and nuzzled it.

Ten minutes later, when they reached their stop at *Noborito*, the mother bowed and thanked him again, still blushing. It wasn't a station he passed through often and Charlie wondered what kind of people lived there. As the *Odawara* line progressed southeast, the train emptied out and the passengers seemed less involved in the desperation of Tokyo. The city seemed to never end, and it always confused him when he passed into other cities and wards that looked identical to the ones before him. But nearing *Odawara* station, there was less tension in the limbs and faces of the passengers. Charlie thought he could sit on a Japanese train until it

reached the end of the earth, just watching strangers come in and depart when they did, carrying the idiosyncrasies of their lives in their hands.

The train stopped and there was an announcement that there was an accident on the tracks ahead and they needed to be cleared before the line could continue. It would take an hour for the accident to be fixed. To Charlie, these accidents almost always meant someone jumped in front of a train, because it was most often the case. The thought of a bloody windshield disturbed Charlie and he disembarked to find something to eat and pass the time.

It was not his first time passing through the station, but he'd never got around to checking out the area. Charlie made his way to a window table at a Ramen store just outside the station building. The food court was swollen with the clatter of pots and conversation. The ramen shop staff yelled a greeting to all the customers who arrived or left in melodic intervals, changing their voices every now and then to fight the monotony. The pork broth was delicious, the noodles perfectly cooked and the egg just runny enough on the inside to spill over the pork slices.

With 30 minutes left Charlie made his way to *Odawara* castle. It was impressive at first. Leaves rustled along the stairs going up to the entrance and the white stone looked imperious under the clouds. But something was off about the interior. It was modern, spacious, with glass cases displaying armour and artifacts from the Hōjō clan, whose crest Charlie recognized from a video game he used to play. How odd it was to be standing there where those names from the game became real, historic. Reading some of the English translations of the placards on the walls and following the timeline of the castle, Charlie learned that the building he stood in was an amalgamation of reconstructions that looked to restore the

castle after numerous deconstructions and earthquakes that turned most of Japan's history to ruin and to symbols.

When he looked back at the ersatz castle, it looked plastic and everything around it, the trees, the souvenir stands, the dressed-up staff, felt like a theme park, a simulation.

Waiting at the station, a synthetic voice announced the continuation of the *Hakonetozan* train over the intercom, the *accident* now fixed. Charlie felt disconnected from everything as the train, covered in stickers of the *kuro-tamago* (black eggs) that got their colour from the sulphur of the hot springs, arrived to a pre-recorded jingle. A light rain covered all the silly simulations in irony as Charlie watched the castle fade into the distance.

It rained whenever Charlie visited Hakone, like the mountains crafted their own clouds from the moisture in the soil and issued them into the dense trees and greenery of the area. All the buildings the train passed looked old. Some were around 30 years old, others looked as if they'd seen a hundred winters, and Charlie wasn't sure how they gave off more of an aspect of warmth from the light in their windows than the newer buildings. A last transfer to a bus and a thirty-minute ride to *Gora* station. He dozed off on the bus, still feeling the discomfort of drinking in his joints, and when the bus made its final stop, he thanked the driver, tapped his IC card on the scanner and crossed the tracks to find out if the *ryokan* he liked had a room for him.

Takashi, the short, excitable clerk welcomed Charlie back by leaving his post behind the counter and hopping over in slippers to shake his hand. 'We missed you.' He blurted out in a strong accent; a phrase Charlie taught him on his last visit. Something about his face always gave off the

impression that he had something he wanted to tell you, like a little brother you haven't seen for a couple months. He'd close his eyes and smile whenever he was affectionately called to help with something, or just to chat.

'Is there a room for me?'

'Yes yes yes, you are always welcome.' Takashi busied himself with papers and paraphernalia before handing Charlie a document to sign. *'You are here alone again?'*

'Ah the painter is here.' Shigenori shuffled around the corner carrying fresh towels. Though covered in wrinkles and distorted into a permanent frown, Shigenori was still friendly, pushing strings of his oily hair over the bald patch in the middle unconsciously. *'Takashi, why is here alone again?'* He asked before disappearing upstairs with the towels. The informal atmosphere was why Charlie loved the ryokan which was more a ryokan in design than in execution. It was like coming home to a family who used the first couple conversations asking about why you weren't married and carrying children around by the handful.

'Is it busy?'

'Spring is coming. Then it will be busy. But there is a German couple here and a man from Kyoto. Ayaka will be happy to see you.'

Takashi handed him the keys waiting for a response.

'Which room is it?'

'Yes, please follow me.' Takashi boasted his memorized English phrases as they walked past the reception area deeper into the narrow room which had the rustic bar at the end of it and around the corner, taking up the majority of the L-shaped entrance. *'Your room is upstairs, on the left, then right. In the corner. Room number ... wait what was it?'*

'16.'

'*Rightly so. Please let me know if you need anything and don't forget to put your name down to use our *onsen* in the basement.*'

'*You practiced. It's very good.*'

'*Thank you, Charlie. English is harder than French for me.*'

The wooden flooring of the second floor creaked. Paper signs were dotted around the latticework doors asking guests to keep noise to a minimum and for good reason. The doors to the rooms were just swinging partitions with a lock. Luckily the rooms had *tatami* flooring and when your shoes were off you could move around quietly. But some conversations could escape above or below the partition and out into the narrow corridors of the *ryokan*.

There were 2 futons in the room, with pillows and blankets folded on top of them. Charlie lifted the one futon over the other and prepared his bed and pyjamas. He liked to return to his room and be able to get as comfy as quickly as possible. As he was unfolding his pyjamas there was a knock at the door (or the partition, rather). This was odd. The three years he'd been in Japan, no one ever knocked on his door save for delivery companies and those damned NHK salespeople, trying to sell you a TV licence. Charlie stepped off the *tatami* into the slippers the *ryokan* provided and knew straight away it was Ayaka by the black hair visible above the partition.

'You're back.'

'I am back.'

Ayaka kind of moved forward as though she were about to hug Charlie, but hesitated and awkwardly retreated, brushing some of her hair behind her ear. She was in her late twenties, but looked much younger,

like a student. The others called her *Hon-Ayaka* because she was always reading and once flooded the kitchen running hot water into the basin because she was distracted by a book. Her hair looked as though it were dipped in the waters of the underworld and her eyes as though they could swallow the sky. If you looked carefully, you could see little light dots in them – the stars she'd already eaten.

'We are serving lunch soon. Would you like something to eat?'

'Yes please. Let me grab my things and I'll be down in a minute.'

Ayaka mouthed the words, blinking a couple times trying to sound out their meaning. But she didn't move. Charlie grabbed his wallet and phone and room key and Ayaka led him back downstairs to the bar.

Takashi was leaning on the bar, listening to the German couple describe the things they did for the day. Only some of the German English was going in, but enough for him to follow and respond politely. They spoke about a cruise on the lake, a visit to the shrine, the Hakone Open-Air Museum and some of the weird statues they saw, all while munching down on some *tonkatsu*, egg, rice, and some green onion sprinkled about the bowl. Charlie nodded as he took a seat next to them and Ayaka brought him a bowl with a note.

'Today's riddle.' She beamed. When they first met, they spoke about riddles and now she gives him one whenever he eats there. *'It's a really common Japanese riddle, maybe you know it.'* He didn't, of course and the rough translation was: *snack time is 3 o'clock, what time is it now?* *'If you complete it, you can get an extra dessert tonight.'*

'And if I don't?'

'Then you have to take me for dinner.' She studied Charlie's reaction. *'I am joking.'*

‘It’s a deal.’ A non-committal answer Charlie thought nothing of.

Charlie started his *tonkatsu* and after watching him for almost a minute, Ayaka busied herself with other tasks. Takashi and Ayaka were in and out of the bar, but tried to stay around their guests as much as they could, curious to hear what the world is like outside of Hakone. Shigenori loomed in the background, sweeping and doing other menial tasks, masking his interest in the conversation topics with age.

The German couple were friendly, charming really but when the woman turned to Charlie to ask whether he’d tried the black eggs from *Owakudani* up the ropeway, there was an almost intoxicated look to her happiness. Charlie, used to the guarded and private approach of both himself, and Tokyo, answered almost shyly.

‘Yes, a hundred times.’

‘Oh so, you will live to be very, very old then.’ She jested.

‘I hope not.’

‘You look German, why do you look German?’ The man joined.

‘I am from Namibia.’ Charlie offered, filling his mouth with pork and the soft, gooey egg.

‘Oh, Windhoek?’

Their knowing the name threw Charlie off, he didn’t expect anyone to know anything about Namibia, even if they were German. They chatted about where they were from, about Berlin and Namibia, and Japan and all those other dull things you talk about with other guests at a hotel.

They really were friendly, and the three of them ended up laughing together, genuinely enjoying the company, a rare thing for the version of Charlie he had become. What was a bit odd, however, was how the woman every now and then would shake. Nothing too noticeable. Something like a

little shock to the lower back, just a quick jolt that made her blush and whichever of them was speaking stop, holding back what Charlie guessed to be a laugh. Ayaka and Takashi didn't seem to notice.

The man, who introduced himself as Christian, ordered a bottle of whiskey, stroking his chiselled jawline and the neatly kept, brown beard that framed his dark complexion and deep-set eyes. The woman, Annika, turned on her stool to face Charlie, her brown hair tumbled in waves down her thin features. They were attractive and Charlie loved her freckles. She explained how they liked to visit AfrikaBurn in between the Northern and Western Capes of South Africa with those closest to them; an international group of travellers that included the South African couple that introduced them to the festival.

Charlie listened to some of their crazy stories about the festival after agreeing to join them for a glass of whiskey. They spoke of being washed in the nude by a group of elderly festival veterans, of some of the intricate art installations that were like puzzles towering into the desert sky, and how (after the courage of whiskey loosened their tongues, Charlie thought) they'd visited a deep breathing orgasm tent, where hundreds of strangers brought themselves to climax in a tent that could only realistically hold half the number of people.

Takashi had all but given up trying to complete any of his tasks as he was caught up in the conversation. Words like nude and orgasm undoubtedly arresting his attention. How could strangers talk about such things? With each story, Annika's tremors got worse and doubled in frequency. Takashi took a notice of them too, but didn't betray his confusion, listening to how some of the art installations took you to different corners of the festival, hiding pieces of it here and there to be

uncovered and reconstructed.

‘Charlie, maybe your art can be there on day.’ Takashi smiled.

‘You are an artist?’ Christian filled another glass of whisky for himself.

‘No. I am not.’

‘He is.’ Takashi continued. ‘But he doesn’t show.’

‘You do not like what you do?’

‘It’s not that.’

‘Then what is it?’ Annika moved closer, resting her cheek in the palm of her hand against the bar. The stabilization of the bar eased her tremors, but her thighs would not be free of them so easily. Charlie couldn’t help but look down at them, at how her jeans held them together like a waterskin. Christian rested his chin on her shoulder, a smile sneaking its way into the corner of his mouth as he caught Charlie’s slip of attention. Takashi’s was needed in the laundry rooms in the back.

‘It’s silly, not really something you’d say to strangers.’

Charlie’s chest tightened as he tried to answer.

‘Are we still strangers if we have shared whisky?’ Christian asked, lifting off Annika’s shoulder to take a swig.

Annika tapped Charlie’s thigh in excitement. ‘What is it then?’

‘I guess I just feel like an impostor.’

‘How?’ Annika put her hand on Charlie’s leg, this time leaving it there.

‘I haven’t had a lot of paintings in any galleries, and I’ve sold even less. Maybe I wasn’t meant to be a painter.’ There was no emotion in this observation.

She squeezed his leg and Charlie felt her tremor transfer through her

arm into his leg.

‘Then what are you meant to be?’

‘A labourer maybe. A builder or a logger. I could just cut things down all day. Hacking at the bark. Maybe I’d see myself in the fragments of wood in the mud, the offcuts. And I’d kick them away, wiping sweat off my brow.’ Annika’s next tremor was more than noticeable, and her eyes closed for a second. Christian took another mouthful of whisky. Charlie got the impression of gentle madness in them, a madness that pushed away thought when the time was right. He hesitated, but they looked at him, waiting for him, so he continued.

‘Maybe I am not a painter, or anything really.’ He emptied the last bit of whisky over his tongue and let it wash down his throat. The remainder of his answer played out quietly in his head: *I am tired of failing and my body hurts from all the distance between me and the world. Like all the aching, empty spaces in me will never close, and I will never be able to express them.* He felt their madness catch and almost said what he was thinking. Annika grinned at him like a mad puppet.

Annika’s hand let go of his thigh, and she inhaled sharply, trying not to close her eyes. Her hand, still against his leg, turned inwards in a spasm and she let out a toot followed by a giggle as a reset to her disobedient limbs.

‘Please excuse me.’ She went upstairs, lifting herself up using the handrailing.

‘Is she okay?’ Charlie asked with the deflated feeling of having chosen speaking over silence. If he could have shoved his words back into his mouth and chewed them, he’d have a belly full of syllables.

‘Oh yes, very okay.’ Christian lifted the bottle in a gesture of

offering, but Charlie refused.

‘I’d like to visit the shrine by the lake before I lose the day to drink. Thank you, though.’

‘Will we see you for dinner?’

‘If I figure out this riddle before then, then yes.’ He held up the piece of paper Ayaka handed him. Christian nodded and poured himself another glass of whisky. Charlie took his leave and started up the stairs. He needed to wash the numbness of the whiskey out his cheeks before leaving.

Navigating the wooden apertures of the ryokan, he reached his corner and was about to unlock the partition to his room when movement caught his attention down the adjacent corridor. Across the way, almost on the other side of the *ryokan*, Annika’s back was against the wooden wall, her legs out in front of her holding her up. The intervals of her tremors had all but reduced and her knees looked as though they could fail any second and she’d collapse onto the floor. Charlie was about to call out and ask if she was okay, but she hadn’t noticed him, her eyes closed, and nothing about the way her body moved suggested pain or discomfort. Rain fell on the ryokan roof in curative winds.

The lock and key were unkind to him. Charlie confused the locker key for the room key and was clinking away outside his room like a klutz. Luckily this didn’t arouse Annika’s attention. He resolved to try to go about the rest of the day without the odd overconfidence of the couple creeping in. But curiosity dragged him back to Annika. She still hadn’t noticed him, he thought, and took out his phone to feign inattention, an excuse for the pause. But he was looking at her, out of the corner of his eye at first. Then, completely.

Charlie could see the vulnerable contours of her veins falling into

her collarbones as Annika's head tilted back against the wall, her hair falling off it like honey-brown ivy hanging of a wooden building. The heaving of her chest made her breasts bounce, and the cotton of her shirt tighten around them, backlit by the lamps hanging on the walls. A rush of blood found its way between Charlie's legs, and he felt himself grow against his zip. Discomfort and guilt followed quickly, what was he doing watching this girl's body fail her and what about it gave him this erection?

A dry gulp was all he tried to reset his thoughts and enter his room, but when he looked up from the curve of her body, she was looking at him, out of breath and dishevelled, but smiling. Charlie flushed and tried to hide the evidence of his arousal. About to say something and turn away, she just lifted her index finger in front of her smile, arresting him completely. The warmth of whisky and the electricity of whatever this was, coursed through his nerves and he became acutely aware of all the blood in his body, as the world took on an unreal aspect, reason withdrawing into the eaves. Annika trembled and smiled.

Charlie was unsure of how to respond, but feeling without thought pushed out the anxiety temporarily as Annika's hands unfastened her belt and the buttons of her jeans. It was half a performance and half something else. She lowered her jeans and underwear to just above her knees. It was as if the light coming through the lattice wood were dreaming her image. A milky dream of brown locks and lamplit thighs. The tremors caused her to jiggle in the light.

Something like a laugh and an exhale came out of her. She covered her mouth and looked over at Charlie, her eyes expanding above her cheeks. Charlie could feel the lining of his trousers print against his erection. It hurt, and he wanted out. But Annika's eyes disabled the nerves

in his limbs, as she put her finger in her mouth and bit down into it. A madness in her eyes gave Charlie the impression that she could destroy the world, like the rain falling on the roof was hers.

Her knees were weakening, and the tremors were constant now. The muscles in her face eased into a numb droop but her bite doubled as she struggled to keep herself up against the wall. Then everything in her tensed. All of her focussed on not making a sound. And, as the tension released, a transparent liquid squirted out of her. A vibrator fell with it and vibrated loudly against the wood. More liquid fell out of her, and her body trembled violently. Her legs failed, and she dropped down the wall, falling into the pool of glossy liquid underneath her.

She hurriedly turned off the toy and clutched it to her chest, trying to catch her breath for a second. When she returned to herself, she looked at Charlie in a matter of fact kind of way. Then removed her boots, her socks, and her partially wet jeans. She dipped her fingers in the mess and brought the sticky liquid to her lips, pursing her lips around her fingertips and sucking them clean.

When she stood, there was new life to her body. The light fell differently on her, a jealous light. She turned to face Charlie. Strings of liquid hung between her thighs, and she smiled, almost politely. Then disappeared into her room. The rain continued to fall on the roof in curative winds.

Charlie looked at his keys for no other reason than he didn't know what else to do. She came back out, still nude waist-down, holding a big white hotel towel. She wiped up the mess and something about the image reminded Charlie of a *Ukiyoe* painting. He wanted to paint her just like that, half nude, on her knees absorbing something from inside of her with a

towel.

Noticing Charlie was still there, she gave him a look that said *awwwww, adorable*. Then shooed him into his room with a mischievous expression of admiration. All he could manage was to drop his keys. And she laughed at him, like he was the strange part of the scene.

He tried to wash the numbness of the whisky out of his cheeks but found a different sort of numbness set into them, one that couldn't be washed out. The blood wouldn't withdraw from his cock. He drank 3 glasses of water and manoeuvred his hand down his pants and over his erection, squeezing it as if to suffocate it. A pale, papery version of himself looked back at him in the mirror and he remembered the mass of limbs outside the hotel that morning. What was it that drained the colour in him? Why was it that others were filled with beauty and he, full of papery mush?

He squeezed his erection harder and with his free arm, lifted his black vest up to his ribs. Holding it there for a second, he examined his body; the depression of the naval, the v-lines more from skinniness than exercise, and the network of light-blue veins, branching down his pale stomach. It was more a half translucent membrane that covered him, something like cellophane over a packet of water, blood and bone. He undressed. His erection left him, and the frump of genitalia hung there dumbly. He continued to inspect his body, hoping to find something he liked, as if just being in the presence of Annika would have changed something in him. But it was the same body, the same stringy, fleshy box that he moved around in.

His nose started to bleed. Always the right nostril for some reason. He tasted drops of blood falling down the back of his nose into his mouth

and then plugged his nose with the tip of his thumb. Charlie calmly reached for some bunched up tissue and caught the red before it dripped down his body or onto the wood of the bathroom counter.

What was he? To be something was to sniff blood down the back of your throat, to release liquids when no one was watching.

Unsure of what to find downstairs, or what he would do if Annika and Christian were there, Charlie opted for the staircase closer to the entrance, the stairs that lead to the *onsen* in the basement if you continued heading down them. He did what he could to abate the noisy wood of the stairs that cracked in horror under him, but it made a noise anyway.

Christian was chatting away to Takashi at the bar. The whisky appeared to have little effect on him. Spotting Charlie at the entrance, he nodded and raised his glass.

‘I hope you enjoy what you see.’ A leathery gentleness painted on his features.

Takashi looked around the corner to see what caught Charlie’s attention and cartoonishly waved Charlie goodbye.

Ayaka was waiting at the door. Bouncing her socks against the floor of the *genkan*, the vestibule for guests’ shoes. Ayaka was observing the rain. The view through the glass door, of a vegetable store with dilapidated awnings, reminded Charlie of the Nishikawa gallery where the lady offered him and Tagg some tea, a black and white world covered in a raging grey membrane of water.

‘Are you going somewhere, Ayaka?’

‘Maybe. But, I have nowhere to go.’ Still looking at the rain.

‘There is always somewhere.’

‘Sometimes, things have a way of tying you to a place.’ Charlie

missed the meaning of the words but heard what he thought sounded something like sadness.

‘*Are you okay?*’

‘Did you complete the riddle?’

‘No, but it’s in my pocket.’

Ayaka, as if remembering where and who she was, readopted her happy customer-care smile. ‘Forgetting counts as failing, okay?’

Charlie shrugged in an acceptance of the terms. When his sneaker laces were tied, he flung the hood of his raincoat over his hair and walked out into the grey. Ayaka bounced her socks again, dropping the happiness. She watched him leave, hoping he’d forget.

-

The trouble with the Hakone mountains were the buses. They chugged up snaking roads and stopped almost every 4 minutes for a tourist or disassociating local, who tapped their IC cards almost unconsciously. Getting anywhere took a day, but Charlie didn’t mind it too much, with nowhere to be. He tried to replace thoughts of Annika with the green-grey landscape and cliff faces the bus followed. Looking out the window, he tried to imagine what it would be like to paint the grey spaces between the trees and hills, but the expressions of paint that came to mind were interrupted with images of Annika. He got out his sketch pad, rested it on his lap. He didn’t open it and left his pencils in his backpack.

Getting off the bus always robbed the moment of its excitement. The rain retreated to a drizzle and most of *Lake Ashi* was hidden in the grey. Looking at the sign at the bus stop, the name was fitting, like the lakeside

town was smudged with ash. Walking in the other direction of the town, he followed the road to the *tori* that marked the entrance of the *Hakone* shrine. Cedar trees reached into the clouds and covered the shrine and mountainside. Asphalt slowly gave way to dirt, which then gave way to moss and its vibrant green of shallow waters. Charlie was careful to follow the cobbled path, cautious not to disturb the moss, his sneakers gathering the mud between the rocks.

To the left, trees framed the path to the waterside and the *Heiwa no Tori*, the orange tori gate in the water, some 10 meters out. The cliché poster of the area. To the right, cobblestone steps to the shrine. Transparent umbrellas floated up and down the stairs as Charlie ascended, water dripping off them onto his raincoat whenever he passed a stranger. He was the only one without an umbrella, never really needing one in Lüderitz. The days were either dry or it stormed, flooding the roads between delapidated buildings. He wondered how much of his memory of the town was accurate or imagined.

He never thought he'd envy a place its history. There was so much of it here in Japan and, though half of it was rebuilt or covered in glass, you could feel its history in the walls, in the names of those you met. There was no history where he was from. Namibia and most of the southern ends of Africa was a landscape of crops and game farms and cities that were just over a hundred years old. What history there was, was executed or taken and rewritten. No one spoke of it. No one wrote it down. Everyone seemed to forget who they were. Memory become a distortion of light over the desert – too far to reach, to unreal to touch.

The first breath of stairs opened to a *kyūdō* dojo with a glass wall that allowed visitors to watch the archers. It was empty save for a few

greying men dressed in *hakama* preparing or cleaning the dojo as other visitors moved by indifferently. Charlie continued up the stairs to the main shrine.

It must have been the hundredth time he visited a shrine. Everything looked wet. The clay tile roof glistened in the fog. Some visitors waited in a line to pray for luck, a good marriage, wealth, and all the other things we feel are missing in us. The clap of every prayer echoed into the mountainside as they bowed, opened their plastic umbrella, and left, allowing the next visitor to throw some coins into the *saisen* box as an offering and make their prayer.

Charlie remembered how enchanted he was the first time he visited a shrine. How the incense and quiet tempted feeling out him, inviting it into his chest. He looked around nervously and imitated what he saw, washing his hands and rinsing his mouth at the *temizuya*, water pouring out of bamboo shoots at the temple entrance, then waiting in line, throwing coins into the *saisen*, bowing, clapping, bowing again, and leaving the queue. It was the only time he imitated the procedure. More excited to experience it all, he gave no thought to praying and hadn't tried again until today.

As the coins clattered down the openings of the *Hakone* offering box, Charlie realized he didn't know how to pray. The last time he tried he was five years old in the back of his father's Toyota Land Cruiser, the wheels turning up the sand of the Namib on their way to *Sossusvlei*. They drove through partings of red dunes over roads that were more the impressions of the previous set of tyres than a road. Skeletons of trees reached out of the yellow earth as if they were trying to lift themselves out of the desert, their dark brown bark howling as the wind buffeted them with sand.

He remembered asking the arching sky if god was there, watching the empty sands shift in the horizon. Or if these trees were all that were left of buried gods trying to crawl their way back into the heavens. He didn't ask for anything. Nor did he look for protection from fear, still too small to know its hooks. He needed nothing, having his father, his mother and his younger brother chewing on a Buzz Lightyear toy next to him. He had everything he needed. Charlie's prayer was just an asking if god was there and, waiting for a reply, the wind breathed over them again, red sand cutting through the white sky as his father pushed a Dean Martin CD into the console of the vehicle. The disk turned in the machine and the trees howled.

Now, bowing in front of different gods, watery gods of islands and forests, Charlie had no idea how to pray. Though he had less than he did back in that Toyota, his family scattered about the planet like the desert's red dust over the windshield, he still didn't know what he wanted. He just stood there, trying to see if he could make out the dreams of the other visitors leaving them, so he could imitate them. Walking away, another clap echoed out into the mountain.

Charlie exhaled and let out a lip trill. He moved off to the right with a comic bounce and looked for somewhere dry to start some drawing practice. The shrines always seemed somewhat abandoned. It was just the *omiyage* vendors in white robes waiting for someone to come buy some trinkets or *omikuji*, a little paper fortune bowed and piled in a box you randomly pulled one out of.

Charlie followed the line of buildings in a circle and ended up to the left of the entrance. A cute raincoated child fumbled forward with his mother close behind. Eyes widening to the size of the shrine, the child

turned around in confusion and ran back into its mother's legs lifting its arm to in want to escape the immensity of trees and mountain behind the shrine.

'Are you okay, Hibiki? What should we ask for today?' They joined the queue some distance away from Charlie.

Charlie was about to lower himself onto a broken piece of wood under a tree, but a structure of hanging plaques of wishes caught his attention. They hung in rows on hooks nailed into the wood of the housing built for them and Charlie read some of them.

Please can I pass my exams and get into a good university for my parents.

I want to find love this summer and go on cute dates with someone handsome.

He couldn't read most of them, the kanji was too complicated, but he leafed through them, lifting them from their hooks to examine them in his hand, to touch the wishes of others, admiring the little drawings and embellishments made to each to catch the attention of the gods. It was all tradition; most Japanese people didn't really believe the gods would grant them anything or that they even existed. Most that Charlie had met, at least. But they continued the traditions. Perhaps so as not to forget who they were.

Charlie snuck a quick search on his cellphone to finally see what they were called after seeing them at every shrine he visited. *Ema*. Unsure of where to get a plaque or how to write on them, and too shy to ask the unearthly attendants of the *omiyage* stalls, Charlie resigned to draw it.

Careful to shield his notebook from the light rain, he hunched over it and pressed his pencil to paper. It was half the size of a comfortable

pencil, but still usable. He added two trees around it and the silhouette of a greying man and his umbrella who passed as Charlie looked up. But nothing else. When he finished, he compared the image to the thing and was somewhat pleased with the minimalist version of it. And, having drawn the prayers of others, finding none of his own, Charlie left.

-

Yui pulled the door to the *kyūdō* dojo closed. It was unnecessarily heavy, as though a vault of sorts. But it was just a wooden room that looked out onto a range with targets. She unfolded her collapsible umbrella and expanded it above her, letting the Hakone rain tap on the nylon. She offered to help get the dojo in order after practice as a thank you for letting her borrow a bow but was declined with gratitude. She was the last guest to leave for the day.

It was her first time shooting after her return from Dublin and she was more than clumsy with the bow in hand. The bow didn't feel foreign to her though, and she quickly fell back into the artfulness of the form, its meditative movements that pushed thoughts out of you in exhalations. She needed it and was happy she took the time to travel here on her day off. There were dojos closer to home, but she wanted to get out and maybe sneak a visit to an onsen before she left.

The last thing she expected was to recognize Charlie's hooded face as he descended the staircase. Yui turned quickly, then tilted her umbrella to hide her profile. She waited, busying herself with her backpack as an excuse for her stasis and when she lifted her umbrella again, he was gone. But when she turned to look if she had closed the dojo door correctly, she saw Charlie looking into the dojo, rain falling down his face.

The dojo was empty, but the lights were still on, and you could see the targets out in the rain in the courtyard of the dojo, some still pierced with arrows. His curly fringe was wet against his forehead, gathering drops of water and letting them drip off the strands down his thick eyebrows and falling over his eyes. But it didn't seem to bother him as the rain dripped off the ends of his raincoat.

Yui turned her umbrella again and moved to take her leave down the cobble stairs. But she couldn't help but turn back to look at him. He had the look of someone vaguely lost. A look she recognized.

'Are you okay?' She asked before she could stop herself.

His eyes were green, with lines of brown in them like the mud and moss of the shrine.

'I'm trying to guess how old this building is.' Yui rested her umbrella on her shoulder so she could look up at him. Something she was not used to, even in Dublin. He was tall. 'Do you know?'

'I don't, sorry.' She looked into the dojo and tried to guess herself. 'Do you remember me?'

'I do. Was that cheesecake homemade?'

'No, I bought it that morning. Did you find a gallery?'

Charlie took his hand out his pocket and pushed his fringe back into the hood of his raincoat. The lights to the dojo were turned off and the white targets became more pronounced in the grey light falling with the rain. 'It is hard to tell how old anything here is with all the reconstructions.'

'Yes, I guess that is true.'

'There's a bakery in the middle of town that does the best sweet potato dessert. Are you hungry? I can make it up to you for the

cheesecake. The view is good too.'

Yui was quiet for a second, trying to understand why he'd ask her to a café, as if it were the natural thing to do.

'You won't see the lake in all this fog.' This wasn't how she wanted to respond, it just happened automatically. A defense mechanism perhaps. For a second, she felt like she would go anyway with him, do anything he asked. She wanted to be reckless, to escape the monotony of her return home and something about the loneliness in Charlie drew her in. She tried to be charismatic, detached almost, like Ryota, and looked away feigning indifference.

'There are other things to see.'

The automatic doors welcomed them out of the rain. Yui shook the rain off her umbrella just outside the door and dropped it into the umbrella stand by the entrance. They didn't say much to each other. The first floor of the bakery were tables of assorted goodies, *melon pan*, *Baumkuchen*, cheesecake, matcha rolls and cookies, *curry pan*, hotdog confectionaries and a thousand other things that made both Yui and Charlie's tummy dance with happiness.

'I love baked things.' Charlie commented as he lifted a *curry pan* onto his tray.

'Me too.' The way Yui dragged out her 'too' almost suggested intimacy between them, but it was just the smell of freshly baked bread and coffee that flooded her with dopamine. Choosing things together, you'd might have mistaken them for friends as they compared their choices and Yui tried to convince Charlie that *Dorayaki* (red bean pancakes) were delicious.

'Red bean paste is an insult to dessert.' Charlie bit into a *taiyaki*

(fished shaped pastry filled with custard).

‘What are you doing, we haven’t paid.’

‘I’ve left the tail. They can charge me for the tail.’

Yui lifted her *taiyaki* and bit the tail off. ‘Now they’ll think we are sharing.’

‘I don’t share dessert, sorry.’ Charlie said cheekily.

After paying, they found a table upstairs next to the glass wall that looked out into the grey clouds over the lake. Yui could just make out the water’s end, as it lapped at the brick built into the bay. They ate in silence, looking out at the rain and sometimes at each other. There was a knot in Yui, not altogether unpleasant, a nervous curiosity. She tried to diffuse the feeling and wondered if the tour boat still went out in this weather. She imagined the boat operators nodding off into a snooze inside the wharf waiting room.

‘Why did you come back?’

‘Come back?’ Yui asked after biting into some *melon pan*. The centre was filled with cream, and she left a dollop on her lip.

‘Why’d you come back from Dublin?’ Charlie was looking out to where the wharf would be if they could see it.

‘How did you know that?’

‘Ryota.’

Yui chewed a couple more times then gulped down the *melon pan*, holding it with both hands just above the table. She looked down.

‘Because of this.’

‘And the cream on your lip?’

She nodded and licked her lips, searching for the dot of cream. ‘Why did you leave your home?’

‘Where I come from, everyone leaves.’

‘That’s not really an answer.’

‘Nor was yours.’

A frail grey man leaning on a cane came into Yui’s view as he ascended the stairs with a tray of goodies and slowly shuffled to a table near theirs. Seeing him, she was reminded of all the structures and routines that were expected of her, how to behave with a stranger and what to say. She thought of the little faces on the television screen prompting their audience on how to respond. She craved otherness, the weirdness of the foreigners she met in Dublin, which was not at all a weirdness to them, just their own cultures and thoughts exploding out of them in loud French and Italian idiosyncrasies. She missed it, craved it.

What did it matter if she abandoned the falsity of the borders around her and just told this lanky stranger what was going on inside of her.

‘It was something someone said to me.’

She paused, waiting for him to ask for more information, but he just nibbled at his cakes, looking at her.

‘They said I couldn’t live my life trying to piece myself together with whatever part of themselves someone gave me. I’d be a mismatch of others and I’d never find what I was looking for because I was a false version of myself. Like a collage of disconnected things.’

Another pause, and for a second she was offended and embarrassed for having tried to be honest.

‘It’s kinda hard not to be a collection of other’s though, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ He reminded her of some the students she met at the university who secretly took everything very seriously but tried not to show it. ‘The books say I have to find *me* though.’

‘How do you know what you have to look for?’

She thought about it, looking at him chew, then getting embarrassed because she thought she may have been staring.

‘I thought it was clues about my father. I never met him and wanted to know what other half I was. The search became more vague though, less describable and what the other half of me was lost its importance. But, I was still looking for something. I just don’t know what. Like I was feeling my way around a dark empty room looking through windows into the lives of others who just seemed to know something I didn’t.’ Yui lifted her coffee to her lips and let it wash over her tongue. Charlie blew on his tea, vapour rising of the liquid. ‘That doesn’t make sense. I am sorry.’

‘Definitely a literature student.’

‘Ryota again?’

‘He doesn’t talk much about himself.’

The gentleman with his cane was joined by a lady. Despite the arthritis in her hands, she’d still done up her makeup and though the colours were all a mess, Yui admired her, the wrinkles in her face pulling her mouth into a permanent, gentle smile.

‘What about you? Why did you leave?’

‘Would you believe me if I told you that I had no reason?’

‘Are you going to eat that last cookie?’ Yui was pointing at the almond cookie on his tray and Charlie laughed. ‘Sorry, am I being rude?’ Yui withdrew into the back of her chair.

‘Not at all.’ He handed her the cookie.

The old couple lifted their choice of confectionaries off the tray they shared, already knowing what the other would choose, and nibbled away. The lady covered her mouth as she chewed.

‘You left without a reason?’

‘Yeah, I had nowhere to go. There was nothing in front of me.’

‘But, why here?’ She washed the remains of the cookie down with coffee, trying not to look at him too much.

‘I used to play a computer game set in the *Sengoku* Period and just decided I’d come here. It was quite random, really. Plus, there’s not much use of a painter in Namibia. It’s just a hole in the earth full of sand.’

‘Do you make all your decisions like that – randomly?’

Charlie’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Maybe.’

‘Show me?’

‘Show you? How?’ Charlie laughed again.

It went quiet between them again. Yui looked out into the grey, trying to think of an idea. But really, she was thinking how odd it was that she let her guard down with this stranger. Perhaps she was tired of feeling invisible and thought she’d throw something real at this stranger she’d probably never see again. A delicious recklessness was firing in her synapses. That, or the dessert coaxed her personality out.

‘Okay, I’ve got it.’ She reached into her backpack and pulled out her smartphone. ‘Make a list of three things you want to do right now on your phone. I’ll do the same.’

‘Okay, I’ll try.’ They both opened their phone notepads and typed down a list. It took Charlie much longer than he’d like and he was embarrassed by his dull options. Yui combined their lists starting with one of her options, then one of his until there were six.

‘Sleep? Really. Try again.’ She handed him her phone.

The list read: 1. Visit the Narukawa Art museum. 2. Try *kyūdō*. 3. Go to an *onsen*. 4. Get drunk. 5. Walk through the *Sengokuhara* grass

fields. 6. Swim in the lake.

‘Okay, how’s that?’ Charlie asked as he handed the newly edited list.

‘Number six is a terrible idea.’

Charlie shrugged. ‘You told me to change it.’

‘I am going to use a dice generator online and whatever we get we have to do. Deal?’

‘Deal.’

She searched for a dice randomizer and let Charlie press the roll button.

3.

‘What did we get?’

Charlie turned the screen. ‘I guess we are going to an onsen.’

-

‘Is this a bad idea?’

‘Maybe. But we chose a system, didn’t we? Whoever isn’t bathing can eat something at the restaurant.’ Yui reminded him, looking out the window of the bus into the forest arching over the road. A tunnel of wet leaves and winding branches brushed the top of the bus from time to time, as if dusting the roof of memories. The sounds of the trees against the hull of the bus and the orange light falling through what spaces it could find in the leaves covered the surface of everything in a film of nostalgia, like a box of old photographs, diffusing into the dispersing fog. Yui thought of where she was and what she was doing with this stranger. She looked at him when he wasn’t looking, trying to form questions she could ask him.

The bus ride to the *ryokan* was empty save for an extra passenger. His head bounced sleepily in the back, holding a backpack in his arms like

a pillow. Yui assumed he worked at the *ryokan*. A cook, maybe, returning from a couple days off. When the bus stopped, he woke and followed them out of the bus as if automatically and then rushed off to the staff quarters, his legs carrying him forward.

A little unsure of the idea of an *onsen*, a touch of awkwardness had them questioning if the arbitrary choice the dice gave them was not improper. Swept up by the same feelings she had in Dublin, Yui didn't think through the consequences of jotting an onsen visit down on her list of things she wanted to do. Nibbling on those desserts and chatting to Charlie detached her from the requirements of being what she had to be now that she had returned. Next to Charlie she felt as though she were in some other place where things mattered less, where she didn't think of what version of herself she had to be. She got carried away by the transience of it all, of being somewhere else; there was nothing to do but to just wait and see what remained when the day ended, if anything.

Yui was surprised to hear Charlie deal with the receptionist, offering polite phrases and inquiries into the cost of a private onsen. Her worry that he'd think it odd that she couldn't use a public onsen was quietened when he said the same thing. They split the cost and Yui thanked the receptionist, locking their shoes up in a locker and buying some waters at a vending machine that looked so obviously out of place in the otherwise wooded courtyard of the *ryokan*. They followed the arcade. With Charlie, Yui probably looked like a foreigner, but with her grandmother or Rika, the receptionist's eyes never lingered questioningly.

'I think this is us.' She matched the symbol on the key to the door.

Charlie ruffled her hair affectionately 'This place was a good find. Thanks, Yui.' Yui shivered. It was the first time he said her name and the

sound of it made the inside of her cheeks tingle and a part of her stomach feel missing.

The room was quaint, clean. Leaves dangled to the ground from pots hanging from the ceiling and there was a low table with cushions on either side for eating or tea or chatting. Parallel to the table was a clear glass door that opened to the *onsen*. A wall of tree branches covered the *onsen* from the rest of the *ryokan* and, protected from the rain with an overhanging roof, the black waters of the *onsen* remained perfectly still between the rocks and the tiles where guests showered before entering the water, betraying nothing of the pump under the surface that kept the water fresh as it drained out in between the rocks.

Yui dropped her things against the wall and pulled the door open. The clouds moved off and the first light of the moon illuminated the surface of the water. Cicadas issued their cries somewhere in the distance. They played rock-paper-scissors to see who would go first. Charlie won and Yui curled her lips in defeat, dropping onto one of the cushions set next to the table.

Charlie was somewhat odd looking. The wavy middle-parting in his hair looked boyish, but the contours of his face looked tired, too tired for someone with such a boyish cut. And the eyes, deep-set and distracted. Glass eyes looking up into the glass sky as Charlie examined the bathing area. Yui fiddled with her bag aimlessly, looking for something to do, but just wanted to look at him a little more, at his dimples and awkward, sometimes ugly smile that looked out of place. She thought of making him laugh, really laugh, but couldn't think of anything funny to say and when she started, she closed her mouth and resigned to just imagine what an honest smile from him looked like, as he kicked off the *ryokan* slippers.

She wanted to stay and had to think of a reason to.

‘I am still full from the desserts we had. Could I sit with my back against the glass, and we could still talk.’

‘Okay.’ Charlie looked at her expectantly. ‘Turn around then.’

‘Oh yes, sorry.’

‘And cover your eyes.’

The light against her eyelids went dark and she could hear the air enter and exit her lungs. The minerals in the water drifted into the room, mixing with the petrichor of the rain on the trees and mud. The *ryokan* was quite a way up the mountain, and fumes of sulphur from the water soaked into the distance between them and the world.

The metal of Charlie’s belt clipped against something, the fake leather leaving its place. She heard him lose his balance trying to take his baggy black jeans off, and then recover, scoffing as he did. The leaves of the decorative plants rustled, perhaps because his hand touched them as he lifted his arms to remove his shirt.

Yui imagined the lines of his body, the collarbones, and contours of the muscles on his back, how they moved like waves as he dropped his arms to his side, his shirt hanging from his wrists. Was he looking at her as he undressed, or looking away? She heard his bare feet against the tiles, carrying him to the shower, undressed perhaps, v-lines cut into his hips descending between his thighs. Her breathing accelerated and she gulped down the saliva pooling around the tongue she became acutely aware of in her mouth.

The shower jetted against the tiles, waiting for Charlie’s body to obstruct the falling water as it covered him, dripped off his elbows and chin, down the back of his neck as he pushed his curls back. Yui’s arms

grew tired, but she remained perfectly still, counting to 10 repeatedly to distract herself from what she was imagining, thinking of naiads and oceanids she read of in books and how the halfling creatures were always mischievous, playful, neither demons nor gods, creatures that often gave in to the blood of their bodies.

The shower stopped and the voices of cicadas replaced the sound of the water. Yui heard Charlie lower himself into the black sulphuric water of the *onsen*.

‘Done.’ Her elbows ached a little as she dropped her hands to the side and tried to reverse herself against the glass. ‘It’s okay, you can turn around. The water looks more than murky with all these minerals, and you can’t see anything.’

But she didn’t, and her fingers found the glass, guiding her back to wait, where she sat and waited for something to happen. Charlie’s body caused little waves in the water that washed over the rocks and disappeared.

‘Is it warm?’ Yui asked trying to disturb the quiet.

‘It’s perfect.’ But that was all he said. She could see why he was friends with Ryota. The two of them more than likely sat in perfect silence on those film sets of theirs.

‘I’m timing you. Don’t forget.’

But there was no reply again. Yui sighed quietly to herself and turned the ring on her index finger. Someone passed their room. Short quick steps like they were wearing a kimono or yukata. Turning her ring. Water dripping off the rocks down the drain.

‘Do you like living in Japan?’

‘I hate that question.’ Charlie’s voice curved through the opening in

the glass between them. ‘It’s just a way to hunt for compliments about Japan.’

‘You’d think that of someone who left? You don’t think this place is paralyzing? If you aren’t a certain thing, you are rejected, sometimes even disgusting. And, to save themselves from the reminders of otherness, people look away. You become invisible.’

‘What’s wrong with being invisible? It’s a superpower.’

‘I think I’d prefer teleportation.’ Yui thought of the learning studio desk. Of Seiga and Iori, wherever she was, mourning for Xavier who could be sitting in the grass next to his sister’s grave right now. But even she wasn’t invisible. The dead weren’t invisible. They remained in the empty spaces in our bodies, where something used to be. How unfair it was that things were replaced with an emptiness, that sometimes, we were more the things missing from us than anything else. Those unbearable spaces where there was once touch, words, love.

We spend more time looking at prints in the dust than the fingers that leave them. And all those parts Yui thought of as *her*, were covered in the prints of those who were now gone and those she never knew. Why couldn’t anyone see?

‘I don’t want to be invisible.’

The *onsen* water moved about.

‘Charlie?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Will you look at me?’

The ring was between her teeth now.

‘I was looking at you all day, silly.’

Water dripped off Charlie’s cheeks and punctuated the quiet evening

as it fell in drops into the dark water. Yui said nothing for a minute or two.

‘Will you look at me?’ Her voice sounded further away.

‘Okay.’ But before Charlie could get up and turn around, he heard her bare feet against the wet, rough tiles and she was standing in front of him, undressed. Her slate eyes were desperate, almost angry as she looked directly into his and then down to her own body, to the water draining between the rocks.

Her toes were bony, her legs longer than he’d expected. A touch of hair between her thighs, which were toned, almost muscular. The angles from her hips were obtuse. Her belly button indented and the curves of her breasts small, but firm. Her nipples were rounder and pinker than other Japanese girls, her black hair almost covering them, draping over her collarbones that stuck out like roots just under the surface of the earth. Her nose, a little too big for her face, a little too sharp, angular almost, but Charlie liked it. And those eyes, big, sad, and filled with the colour of the fog they were looking into all day, traces of blue behind the clouds in her.

‘Say something.’ She turned the ring on her finger. ‘Is this weird?’

Charlie blushed. ‘Yes.’

She looked back at him but didn’t cover herself.

‘Am I pretty?’

‘You are.’

‘Prove it. Stand up. Show me.’

Charlie laughed, but not nervously. He laughed from the oddness in him, admiring the strangeness that coated the scene, the aching curiosity in Yui’s eyes, giving her that goofy, ugly smile.

‘Okay.’ Half reluctant. He lifted himself out of the water. It fell off him like ink, revealing what was underneath.

Looking at him, it was all as she imagined when he was undressing, and she was covering her eyes. Everything in its place. He wasn't very muscular but what muscle he had was cut. Vague definition of abs above v-lines and small nipples that made Yui want to giggle for a second. Her eyes dropped and she examined him. Water was dropping off the tip of Charlie's erection. He made an awkward *ta-da* gesture to break the tension and Yui blushed and turned around.

'Okay, I believe you.' She said through the black hair hanging over her shoulder.

'Can I sit back down?'

'Yeah.' And he did. 'Okay, thanks.' She cursed herself for saying thank you, all the muscles in her body tingling as she made for the door.

'Wait.' Yui paused, her hand on the door. 'We've already seen each other. Just join me?'

She felt like even her stomach was blushing as it turned like a washing machine full of nervous things. Charlie reached out and she took his hand, lowering herself into the hot water that immediately charged her skin, the chemicals electrifying her nerve-endings. When her nipples were submerged, it felt like someone pinched them and Yui immediately tried to cover them, embarrassed they might get harder than they already were, trying not to look into the water to steal another look at Charlie's body.

Another minute or two passed without them saying anything as they soaked in the black water of the *onsen*, stealing glances when they could. All her pinkness, the texture and colour of her skin, her eyes, the way her hair mirrored the colour of the water, all of it became a feeling Charlie had never experienced, but wanted to keep.

'So, do you like living in Japan?' They laughed – nervously now.

‘You are right, it is lonely.’

Charlie ran his fingers through his hair, to the back of his head, water falling off him. And Yui’s body felt a warmth that wasn’t caused by the water. She wanted to submerge herself in him and thought of climbing into his chest.

‘Then why did you come here?’

‘Unlike you, sometimes, I want to be invisible.’ A cricket somewhere in the trees added its chime to the cicadas. ‘Sometimes, when the day ends, I wish everyone forgot who I was. Then the next morning, I’d wake up free and could start over as someone else.’

‘Who would you be?’

‘I don’t know. Anyone. Anything but me.’

‘But maybe it’s better not to be forgotten.’

‘Maybe. But, right now, I am glad I won’t be.’

‘Why?’

Charlie looked at her, and for a brief second, all the absences in Yui felt a little smaller.

They chatted for another 20 minutes in the water and, when the heat was too much and they both felt too light, they got out, dried themselves and dressed. The intercom buzzed just as Yui was buttoning up her top to notify them that their time was finished. They drank as much of the water Yui bought as they could, to make their bodies feel heavy and real again and left for the station.

-

When Charlie returned to *Gōra* Station there was a tense atmosphere in the air. It was nearing 10 and the almost always quiet station was full of

circles of whispering locals, worry set into their foreheads and voices. Even the oily looking hotdog vendor was about. The hotdog stand was never open passed lunchtime, but there she was, her sausage fingers rubbing the space between her lips and nose.

Charlie passed an old lady in a homemade jumper and a man still in his railway uniform. The gentleman tapped his white gloved thumbs together, perhaps having abandoned politeness sometime ago and was just listening to the age in the lady's joints as she spoke in slow intervals, looking around her suspiciously. She lifted her arm with great effort and pulled at the jacket of the railway attendant as Charlie walked passed them, pointing at him with crooked sewing fingers.

Resisting a look in their direction, Charlie lifted the hood of his coat and disappeared into the tunnel under the cable car tracks. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, the minerals of the *onsen* lingering on the surface of his body. But when he turned the corner to the *ryokan*, blue lights flashed over the closed shutters of houses. Charlie couldn't remember seeing a police station anywhere in Hakone, let alone an officer, but now there was one stationed outside the *ryokan* and undoubtedly more inside.

The officer outside was young and guarded the entrance with the naivety of a rookie, smiling and bowing as Charlie entered the *ryokan*. Takashi was resting his head in his hands, propped up by his elbows on the reception desk as officers made notes in front of him. He looked exhausted.

Acknowledging his arrival, the short more senior officer lowered his notepad and asked Takashi a series of questions about Charlie after greeting him. Charlie listened and, though it was hard to follow the fast

and deep intonations of his voice, he got some of the basic questions about who Charlie was and what he was doing there.

Takashi's answers were fatigued. He wanted nothing more than the officers to leave. They asked if they could search Charlie's room.

'Yes, that would be okay.' Charlie answered before Takashi did and the officer looked at him with confusion, then nodded, indicating to his partner to proceed. They climbed the noisy stairs.

'What is going on?'

Takashi looked at him blankly and processed nothing. Charlie tried again in Japanese.

All Charlie heard was Ayaka's name. The rest of the sentence came out a disarray of syllables slipping off of Takashi's lips. Paralyzed with confusion, he just looked at Charlie. Charlie handed him his phone with the translator open and Takashi typed. A wet sniff dragged up into his nose. Charlie looked at the screen in his hands.

Ayaka is missing. She was to return from grocery shopping four hours ago, but no one has seen her.

The junior officer returned with a note pinched between the white fingertips of his glove.

'This note was on your door. What can you tell me about it?'

Charlie opened the note and read it.

Riddle answer: Now has 2 characters.

Eat something good for me, okay?

Chapter 5 – Frame

‘Eh, you’re burning it, Yui.’

‘I am a spider. I like it crunchy on the outside.’

‘But the meat is so expensive, don’t burn it.’ Rika covered her face with her hands, her eyes peeking through the gaps of her fingers and the three delicate rings adorning them.

The vent above the grill on their table droned as it pulled the meat fumes up and out of the building. Yui turned the meat over with her chopsticks and bobbed her eyebrows at Rika when the other side of the meat was revealed as dark, juiceless.

‘You’re a monster, Yui. Dublin destroyed you.’

Yui faked an evil laugh. ‘And I will destroy you next.’

‘I think I am the one who is going to destroy things.’

‘Hmm?’ Yui looked up inquisitively with meat dangling from her lips. The tastes of the meat pooled in her mouth and she jokingly rolled her eyes back.

The *yakiniku* restaurant was an upmarket date spot in *Ginza* filled with couples and groups of friends dressed in clothing Yui thought too technical for the real world. Coming here was pricey, but Rika had said that there was something she was celebrating, so she’d cover the cost of the food if Yui got the dessert. Dessert, of course, being Yui’s weakness, was an easy way to convince her.

Ginza was charming as always. Bulbs of lights that hung between the skyscrapers replaced the absent stars. The glass of the buildings seemed to reflect bodies more than it reflected people.

There was something unnatural about those who frequented *Ginza*.

Here the rich and enamoured walked around aimlessly. As if being was their only function. As if tomorrow wasn't heaped with responsibility and stacks of documents to complete and throw in a draw. Chances were, they had someone to do all that for them and the dull, aimless slog around markets and overpriced bakeries was all they had.

But perceptions were always incomplete, Yui thought to herself as she looked at her reflection in the glass. She was wearing the same coat she wore to the aquarium, but open, her hands in its pockets. She imitated the *Ginza* fashion as best she could with jeans and heel ankle boots that made her look taller and thinner. The new grey shawl she purchased for the dinner was a few tones darker than her eyes, but they complimented each other. She half liked what she saw but her reflection always reminded her of otherness in a city where it was hammered out until the surface of Tokyo was flat, its faces synonymous.

A price tag dangled from the ends of her shawl and Yui pulled it off, embarrassed not to have noticed it earlier. Of course, there were no trashcans around. This part of the city and others liked to pretend it was free of the normality of trash. The Tokyo middleclass wanted not to be reminded that they too produced waste and would one day become waste. Money bought illusions and kept reality at an arm's length. Yui had no other option but to stuff the price tag in her pocket.

Luckily food was a more than effective salve for the frustrations of thinking. Yui chewed the meat slowly, taking her time to appreciate the different cuts of meat she turned over the mini grill on their table. Rika traded the piece of shoulder clod she cooked for Yui's and lifted the cut to her mouth, chewing on it lazily.

'Hmm, not bad, but the marinade is ruined by the flames.'

‘Then give me my piece back.’

‘No, try mine. I dare you to tell me it’s not delicious.’

It was. Yui glared at Rika, but collapsed into a smile.

‘So, what are we celebrating?’

‘I was going to wait for dessert to tell you. Do you remember the photographs of the drunk businessmen around the city I showed you when you got back?’ Yui nodded turning another cut of meat over the flame.

‘The photography group I am part of is having an exhibition and they want to display and sell some of the photographs I took. How awesome is that?’

Rika was bursting with enthusiasm. ‘I am going to be an artist. A real artist.’ She posed.

Rika reminded Yui of a child waiting to meet a princess at Tokyo Disney. All of her was tensed into a smile and she wiggled a bit in her chair. Yui couldn’t help but get caught up in the happiness, even if she thought it was premature. Rika always had a way of pulling Yui into her feelings and Yui adored her for it as she congratulated her friend with a muted, but deep admiration.

‘Don’t get too excited, please.’ Rika joked.

‘Would you prefer I jumped up and hugged you? You know I am proud of you, Rika.’

‘I’m just teasing.’ Somehow Rika was disappointed in her response even though she could see the immensity of Yui’s feelings for her in her eyes.

‘Can I come to the exhibition?’

‘Obviously, why do you think I am telling you? You have to be there.’

‘Maybe I’ll buy one of your photographs before they get too

expensive.’ Yui returned to her seat.

‘Don’t be silly, you can have any photograph you want for free.’ Then Rika’s mood shifted. She tensed a little, and sat on her hands, searching the table for something. ‘But there’s something I wanted to ask you. Could I ... eh ... could I display the photograph I took of you in the cubicle?’

The cut of meat Yui started grilling before Rika’s news was burning, bubbling its last bit of deliciousness out over the flame between them. Yui quickly lifted it off with her hands and dropped it in front of her, burning her finger in the process, but with an aloof unseriousness that diminished the pain. She hooked her finger in her mouth.

‘Are you okay?’ But Yui was laughing at herself.

‘I am okay.’ She examined the burn then put it back in her mouth. Rika removed some ice from her drink and, taking Yui’s wrist, applied it to her burn.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You didn’t burn me.’ They fixated on the burn. The ice melted and drops of cold water hissed on the grill.

‘You can use the photograph.’ There was affection in her answer.

‘What?’ Rika’s eyes widened. ‘I can, really?’

Yui nodded.

‘Are you sure? I thought I was going to have to persuade you for days and bribe you as best I could.’ Rika tensed, a bit unsure of her friend’s reaction or what to do with it. ‘Are you double sure? I really don’t have to use it. I just love the image so much.’

‘Just don’t sell it to some creep, okay?’

‘Money is money, Yu-chan.’ Rika acted out a shrug. Then looked

back at Yui's burn as the redness retreated under the ice. 'Are you really sure?'

'Yeah.' She popped the remainder of the ice into her mouth. 'To be honest, I don't like my body. It's like it doesn't fit, like it's someone else's.'

'I know, Yui.' Yui looked up into the Rika's sympathy. 'Maybe doing this will help you, right?'

'Maybe. But I doubt it.'

Four pale faces floated by in search of a table. Followed by a rushed waiter with a wooden tray of meat. Yui didn't believe in ghosts. Not the ectoplasm type, but the city seemed to be full of them. She thought of her mother's voice recordings in her pocket. Then she looked around her at the faces of the clientele, pale and vapid in the white synthetic light of the exposed bulbs that hung from the ceiling. Something like 30 faces looked across from each other, waiting for answers from the other.

'Do you remember how you used to wait for all the other girls to leave after basketball practice to use the changerooms?'

Yui exhaled through her nose with nostalgia and embarrassment.

'And how the other girls asked what you did to get your eyelids like that, if you had surgery, and you just remained quiet? Or how the boys teased you because they thought you must have had double the libido of other Japanese girls, just because you were half something else. Didn't that upset you? Didn't you want to kick them?'

'It did.'

'Then why didn't you do anything? I was always fighting for you, but you'd just disappear. You'd run off and I'd find you studying somewhere. Reading away your feelings.'

Shame hooked and hung itself on Yui's ribs. 'I guess, it was easy to disappear, to not be noticed. There was nothing I could do or say to change what I was, to know where I come from. So I chose silence and books.'

'Looking for clues in what you read?'

'Yeah, I guess. But I don't think anyone really knows what they are.'

'Maybe. But we have to keep trying. That's why I want to display your photograph in the middle of all the photographs of unconscious businessmen. All their drunken aching, their stupid acquiescence to their bosses that got them there in the first place. With you in the middle, like a secret the city refuses to see. And everyone would see you as I see you. It's beautiful, isn't it? Is it not beautiful?'

-

The light in Dublin was different. It was old. As old as some of the cobble in the roads. Streets over which tyres of modern vehicles passed. Where hooves and horseshoes once struck the routes to houses. Where everything was slower and more deliberate. Including the flame yellow of the streetlamps. Here, light wasn't intended to catch the eye as it did in Tokyo. Here, all the light did was reveal.

Yui looked out of her apartment window. It was a narrow partition that measured the full height of the room. The three apartment buildings in her area looked out of place amongst all the older buildings. All their windows huddled together as if embarrassed of being something new in a place that wasn't. From the rooftops, Yui could see all the way across the Liffey south of her. And from her window, a narrow aperture of windows of the building across from hers.

The view from the window looked like a painting some mornings,

and like a photograph on others. The texture of the sky being the difference; smudged or crystalline. Yui often woke early and sat with her back against the wall doing readings for class, waiting for the lights of other windows to turn on in the early morning and watch strangers busy with their lives; watering pot plants, changing channels on a television as they brushed their teeth, hanging laundry with their partners, packing their bags, or sleeping on open textbooks.

There was something romantic about the windows of others, how lights were turned on and off. Curtains closed or opened. It reminded Yui of a network board, as if each light was some information that was communicating something to another. But of course, most of what happened in the privacy of the rooms was never communicated, never shared, and though the windows were connected in some way, they were also isolated, lonely. Yui would sip her tea in the dark, the morning not being a time for false light, she thought, and watch the worlds of others switch on and off in a code of interconnected loneliness. And she'd feel the terrible envy of windows.

She imagined what he did in his room. She pictured it as similar to hers, for that is all we can really do, though it couldn't have been. She'd never been in an Irish house. Just the apartment blocks designed for students. She'd seen them from the outside, jammed together in a long strip of housing. All she could do was supplant herself with him and guess what he'd do with his body.

He slept in loose pyjama trousers, covered his eyes with his forearm as he dreamed, the veins in them pronounced around the muscle. He slept in because he was carefree, sometimes late to class, apologizing with charm as he closed the door to the lecture room behind him. He slept in

because life was quick, and he wanted to be slow and deliberate like the streetlamps of the city he was born in.

He never remembered his dreams and stretched like a dog when he woke up, wiping his eyes and curling his wrists. When he stood, his dick was hard, obvious in the loose pyjama bottoms, the material framing his tip that throbbed with blood. But he wouldn't notice most mornings, too sleepy and slow to care. He would open his curtains, and the light would fall on his body. An impressive body, because he told her that he played in the backline of the university rugby team. He'd rub the sleep from him.

This was the image Yui admired most of all the imaginings she did of her classmate; the morning light touching him through the window, falling over him, his serious eyes and the stubble on his chin, the contours of his shoulders and abdominal muscles, innocent and honest above his morning erection. That was how she pictured him, the warmth of jasmine tea floating off the liquid's surface and mingling with the thoughts of him. She wanted him to undress right there, somewhere she could see. She wanted to get caught looking, and blush as he waved carelessly.

Yui looked out over the windows across from her. In one window, she saw the side of a girl's face as she forced breakfast down, looking exhausted. A couple windows up and to the right, a boyish looking figure slapped its cheeks as it looked out into the morning. Most of the windows remained unlit, but Yui felt a faint connection with those who liked to wake as early as she did. The old lights of the city turned off and the washed blue of the morning infiltrated the portrait of her window. The day was bluest then.

A shuffle of socked feet passed by Yui's door. She got up to check what it was about and when she opened her door, her French flatmate

Hugo was shirtless at the front door, waving at someone he'd just snuck out. He gave Yui a goofy half embarrassed smile when he turned around and tiptoed toward her.

‘Will this one be back?’ Yui asked cheekily, trying to keep her voice down so as not to wake their other flatmates.

Hugo shrugged. ‘We are going to the concert tonight?’

‘Yeah, I’m excited.’

He started to his room down the hall, but reversed back and invited her closer to share some secret.

‘There is more pate in the fridge. Please eat some.’ He walked away, then back again. ‘But not all.’

What struck her about the memory of the day was how the morning tea and conversation with Hugo was the only part she was sure about, the only part that played out at a reasonable pace, like that fragment of the memory was built from recognizable components. The rest of the day felt unreal, a fiction she invented perhaps, that flung itself forward and churned seconds into a quasi-memory with a nauseating efficiency.

The walk to campus. The late shift construction crew cracking cans at the bus stops just as the light turned pink. The code at the department door, 1407. Studying in the empty lecture theatre. A tutorial about something perfectly forgettable. Lunch at The Buttery. A film society meet up. Returning to the lecture theatre. A 5 Euro chicken sandwich with a Snickers at the Spar just outside the front gates of campus. The comedy night posters outside the Stags Head down Dame Lane. All these places she'd once been.

When she got home, Hugo's friends were already there, arguing about something in French and then in broken English, with bits of

Spanish and cloudy Irish accents, passing wine glasses and bowls of chips around the living room with other students from the exchange programs. There was Joachim, with his carved features looking like a short Chilean philosopher. Gabriella and her red, weed swollen eyes, mouth hanging and a handful of chips. A pale and out of place looking blonde, who laughed too late at jokes, smiling into her cheeks like she was desperate for intimacy. And the others. All the others whose names were forgotten.

When asked to join Yui quickly shed herself of the days objects and was offered a glass of wine from Julia who met her with a hug.

Julia was full of quips, adored for her confidence and a sensitivity made all the deeper with the curls cascading around her face. There was no doubt the ornate superciliousness of Hugo's Parisian cousins made Julia nauseous, but she teased Hugo about them and wrinkled her freckles in a laugh when they scoffed at her with their *Parisian mucus*, as she called it.

Joachim asked questions, unaware his gaudy Italian classmate with an overly boyish face was trying to flirt with him. Gabriella rolled a cigarette, trying to remember the Portuguese song she wanted to play for the room. And the blonde looked at objects around the room, trying to give the impression that the only reason no one was talking to her was because she was preoccupied.

'Yes, but if he likes her, why is he sleeping with the teacher?' Hugo's arms were unfolded in front of him in a look of silly frustration.

'No, he doesn't like her, then. He is too attached to his teacher.' Julia's friend Manon offered. Yui suspected Hugo had feelings for her. He was always starting up arguments with Manon.

'Giovanni is heartless, he cares only about his cock.' Manon continued. Yui still couldn't believe there were people called Giovanni.

She thought it was just a name from films. An image of a shirtless, greying man with a square nose came to mind.

‘Yui, Giovanni is a good man, no?’

‘He is a pig, Hugo.’ Manon interrupted.

Hugo threw his arms up in defeat and exited onto the balcony to catch his breath with the smokers, looking over the street like crows.

After they’d consumed what trashy wine the guests brought with them, they all left for the club, moving around each other like a bundle of excited atoms. They stopped at an off-licence to purchase a 2litre mix of brandy and passed it around, drinking it in big gulps somewhat indiscreetly, arguing now about what is a reasonable price to pay for a pizza and how most of the Dublin pizza was more tasteless dough than pizza.

Yui refused the bottle when it reached her, following in the back by Julia’s side. Always by Julia’s side. They didn’t take much notice of the others and walked in the back like lover’s unconcerned with anything but each other, speaking as if in their own language. They crossed the Halfpenny Bridge and showed their IDs at the entrance of the club to the bouncer who nodded them in.

The passageway was more a tunnel and looked like the interior of a steel beam, like they were walking into the actual matter of the building as it darkened. The walls got grimier with posters and paint and sweat and the residue of wanton thoughts.

‘Have you been here before?’ Julia asked carefully.

‘No.’

‘It’s not as bad as it looks.’

They exited the steel frame and arrived at some stairs. It was unclear

what was either up or down. The building somehow required that you knew what was inside, or that you would gamble and choose where to go randomly. The building was deceptive from the outside and Yui would never have guessed that there was such depth to its rooms from its box appearance on the street, if whatever was passed the stairs could be called rooms.

‘There are four floors. Two above and one below.’ Julia explained quietly in the back of their group of lumbering drunks. ‘Above us, the Trap floor. Below us, the Dungeon, alternative and metal. This floor is normal EDM.’

‘And the top floor?’

‘It’s called Heaven. I have never been up there.’

How odd it was to be confronted with such choices. The genres of music seemed so incongruous, so different that they belonged in different buildings.

‘Where do you want to go?’

Was it easier for others to choose? Perhaps they came here with a floor in mind, and orbited that room for the evening, filling up their bodies with the sounds they liked and thrashing about with the movements they craved. Impatient and thirsty for the evening’s madness, the rest of their lot pushed forward to the floor Julia called normal.

‘We can go somewhere else if you want. I’m staying with you tonight.’ Julia’s curly locks framed her face so perfectly they looked fake for a second in that light, like a wig, but the smile wasn’t.

‘Just follow the others?’

‘Okay.’

It was normal. Or what she’d seen in films. A gutted theatre

converted into a club. There was a bar under an archway, a gateway to intoxicants for dancers and drinkers, and lights that changed the colours of all the bodies Yui could see. The others were already at the bar with glasses of alcohol lined up.

‘Yui, come here.’ Hugo gestured excitedly. ‘Tell me, are you a tequila or Jägermeister person?’ Yui looked at him confused.

‘Hugo’s theory is that you are a tequila person if you are outgoing, confident, full of life, like this buffoon.’ Manon smacked his shoulder. ‘Or you are a Jägermeister person. A little more serious, maybe *mélancolique*.’

‘A little cold inside like this one.’ Hugo brushed her cheek. She made to punch him but didn’t as he recoiled with a laugh.

‘It is nonsense, of course.’

‘These are the words of a Jägermeister person, no? So, what are you? I will buy for you.’

No one had ever asked her what kind of person she was, let alone what kind of person she was based on the type of alcohol she most commonly shot. She’d hardly ever drunk before coming to university in Dublin, save for a glass or two of *shochu* with her grandmother from time to time.

‘Get us vodka, Hugo.’ Julia offered, coming to Yui’s defence.

‘Oh, so you are *anarchistes*?’

‘No, we are thirsty.’

‘*Qui vivra verra*.’

They all grouped in a makeshift circle, and clinked their shot glasses together, issuing their language’s version of cheers. Yui cheered with them, downing the liquid after adding *kampai* to the other voices. The vodka burnt its way down Yui’s throat, dragging Hugo’s question down with it, to

be digested with the poison. What was she? All the cells in her body that she didn't recognize cried out.

They broke off in groups. First Hugo and Manon ran off into the dancefloor, forgetting the rest of them the way a puppies forget everything when they first meet. Then the Italian students with the haughty Parisian cousins. Joachim and Gabriella were deep in a conversation about film at the bar. All that was left was Yui, Julia and the now hauntingly quiet girl with blonde hair and her Victorian appearance, almost sickly. In the light, Yui could see traces of blue veining up her neck into her cheeks. Yui couldn't remember her name, though she was told it earlier.

'Do you want to dance?' Julia asked looking up at Yui.

'Okay.'

The blonde girl followed.

Their movements could be charted in straight lines from the dancefloor to the bar. They sometimes bumped into other members of their initial group and bought drinks with them, all drinking for the courage to achieve some end, to talk to someone cute, or to forget someone cute. Then back to the dancefloor, because they were still afraid.

With little experience being drunk, Yui drank slowly until the haze of intoxication infiltrated her body and she almost forgot her embarrassment of dancing in front of others.

She found herself liking beer, which was new and when asked what shot she wanted, always ordered vodka, because that's what Julia chose, and Yui felt Julia could not be wrong. And so, the night continued, in their dotted lines from bar to dancefloor, in full glasses turned empty.

'Should we try another floor?' Julia asked from behind the toilet cubicle door.

The doll-like blonde nodded.

‘Yeah, let’s try it.’

Returning to the staircases after a couple drinks altered the aspect of the staircase chamber. It was brighter, and more intact. She felt solidity return to her when her sneakers fell on the metal staircase and the air from outside rushed through the chamber. Yui tried to imagine what was upstairs and how it would alter her.

They ascended and the heavy bass of the music vibrated the clothes against their skin. Yui touched her clothes as if they were someone else’s, trying to understand where the feeling came from. Julia took her hand.

‘Don’t think about it, just follow me.’

The bodies on this floor moved differently. A different energy possessed the dancers. They were older. A lot of them were wearing boots that matched the industrial clothing that either hung or hugged attractive bodies of various shapes and sizes. It was erotic. Yui felt her cheeks redden. The music was less repetitive, punctuated by build ups and drops that chilled all the nerves with a rush of dopamine. The blonde lead them into the crowd and Julia followed, pulling Yui along with her as they lost themselves in the sounds.

Yui recognized some of the lyrics of the music. 50% of the music was the stuff from the floor below them, but changed, rearranged and layered over different effects, built up and dropped in outrageous flashes of electronic chords. Here, the *normal* was to be transposed into something more bodily, more carnal. The other half of the music was hip-hop with bass levels that made the water in your body ripple. Yui had never paid so much attention to music before. She tried to forget herself to the sounds.

Julia moved differently. The blonde too. They seemed to have no

trouble adjusting to the changes around them and became other things. Julia's facial expressions transformed, the lights of the dancefloor distorting the falls of her features as she let go to intoxication and music. The curves of her lips opened and an expression Yui recognized from the porn magazines she looked at with Rika found its way onto Julia's face. Disarmed, Yui could not help but look at her.

They drank and danced without seeing the others who must have remained *normal*. Yui decided that the trap floor version of her drank whiskey. She played at being someone else and was starting to like it, imitating the way Julia moved her wrists. Then without warning, the blonde asked if they could go down to the dungeon. She failed to smile and waited for Yui and Julia to answer as if the question embarrassed her.

Julia ran her fingers through her fringe, her eyes doubled, examining the girl for clues as to why she'd want to go down there. Before they knew it, they were descending the staircase.

The *dungeon* was pitch black. A distorted bassline with eery synth chords pulled them in with an almost hypnotic quality. Lights flashed with the sounds, revealing the mass of bodies in the dark. Drums started, but just a subtle rotation of lower tones. A clear voice came out of the speakers.

*Open up my brain
tell me what you see
I can't find a thing
Won't you rescue me.*

'I love this song.' The blonde looked into the dark room then to Yui and Julia. 'Let's go.' She almost ran off without them.

The drums broke the hypnotic feeling of the music, but there were vocal parts that made the music feel almost religious, like something you'd hear in a haunted church and then the clean vocals would bring you back. Yui felt herself shifting between these two worlds of the music, between the ceiling and the floor, between her bones and Julia's as they felt their way through the dark behind the white trace of the girl.

Yui could only make out the gentle swaying of the other bodies around them as they found a place in the mass. The blonde's sickly aspect looked fitting in the dungeon. There was something beautiful about her here, pale and fading like a saint as the stage lights touched her face. Other ghosts danced around her, diaphanous; with something of a pulse.

'Are you ready?' Yui saw something in the girl's eyes she didn't recognize. Julia moved closer to Yui, so their arms were touching. The music broke into another quasi-religious hum of chords and choir. The blonde mouthed the words next to her as if prayer.

'Time has no frame, time has no frame.'

And then, with rage and fury and anguish, the music exploded into every corner of the room. The lights erupted in flares of white and Yui looked at the blonde who growled with the vocalist, the veins in her neck pulsing with desperation, with loneliness, with all the things in her she couldn't see. She closed her eyes, her canines illuminated by the white light.

'Well, I belong right here

where the light runs from me.

I don't believe in fear,

Cause this place can't haunt me.'

The words were repeated but the blonde, with everyone else in the

room was throwing their hair back and forth with the music. Julia looked at Yui and shrugged, breaking into a smile. They joined in.

Yui could faintly make out a circular area opening in front of them. The space was devoid of any dancing, but bodies jumped and ran into each other, crashing limbs against limbs. They seemed to recklessly be trying to collide with each other, not to hurt, but to touch, to impress themselves into other bodies.

The blonde, now bouncing on her feet, hopped into the mess and threw herself at whatever was around her, the white lights strobing, each flash a frame or photograph of their half violent collisions.

‘What is going on?’ Julia was on her tiptoes, half yelling and laughing into Yui’s ear. Yui fumbled her fingers into devil horns and laughed at Julia who did the same.

‘Can you scream like that?’

‘Wanna try?’

They both tried to scream with the music but came nothing close to the growling timbre of the vocalist.

The Victorian girl was somewhere in the circle of bodies, elbowing others twice her size, her hair dishevelled, falling in thin strands over her pale, closed eyes. Yui tried to find her by jumping and looking into the crowd. A stray elbow caught Yui in the nose, and, without a hint of pain, blood started falling out of it.

-

The heavy music raged on behind the soundproof door. Yui was waiting for Julia to return with some toilet paper to cover her bleeding nostrils. The blood pooled in the hand that was clutching them desperately.

‘Here, let me.’ Julia covered Yui’s nose with the toilet paper. The red soaked into it immediately. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, it doesn’t hurt.’

‘It’s a little awesome, isn’t it? Knocked in a mosh-pit and you feel nothing.’

Yui blushed. ‘Yeah.’ Julia gave Yui some of the toilet paper. She rolled it between her fingers and when Julia removed the toilet paper from her nose, Yui plugged the holes. Her philtrum and lips were red with blood. Julia’s fingers were red too.

‘Sorry about that.’

Julia looked at her fingers, turned them in the light. She put her finger in her mouth and sucked the blood off her index finger. Then looked back at Yui, embarrassed. The music droned from the door behind her.

‘Why did you do that?’

‘I don’t know.’

They didn’t break eye contact. Julia crouched in front of her and brushed her thumb against Yui’s bloody lip.

‘Are you okay?’

Yui opened her mouth and took Julia’s thumb into it, sucking the blood off. Blinking but not embarrassed. Julia’s thumb was released, and she lowered her fingers to Yui’s neck, reaching around it like a necklace. Red crept its way down the toilet paper in Yui’s nostrils. Julia leaned forward and licked the top of Yui’s bloody lip, then pressed her own against them.

Somewhere inside the dancefloor, a pale blonde howled into the dark ceiling as Yui and Julia kissed on the stairs.

Julia returned to herself and moved away. ‘I am sorry.’

‘We should go.’ The interlaced metal of the floor vibrated under Yui’s sneakers.

Yui got to her feet, and they climbed the stairs.

They left for home through the drunk hours of the city but were in no rush. They crossed bridges multiple times, looked into the windows of stores, imagined the other things they could be, looking for the words to talk about what just happened. A ways off from their route home, ambling up Grafton street, a synthetic display of expensive clothes caught their attention. The material looked delicate, like it would fall apart if you touched it. The mannequin reminded Yui of the blonde they left somewhere on the metal dancefloor.

‘The girl who was with us, the blonde. Do you remember her name?’

‘No.’ Julia couldn’t take her eyes off the clothing, but there was an absent, distant quality to her eyes, like she was far away, on the other side of the glass, looking into the moment the way you look at a photograph of someone you haven’t seen in two decades.

‘Yui, are you happy?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you happy? Now? With what you are.’

Versions of herself formed in front of her. A published academic, with a look of quiet resignation or anger fastened to her face, but still loved by her students. A businesswoman in dress suits, cruel fingers, and a strict diet she cheated on twice a month. A mother. A dancer. A forensic analyst looking at dead bodies all day. Or maybe an adult video actress, curled in the body of another, sedated with pleasure as she was filled and undone. None of them a reflection. None of them real.

‘I don’t know.’

‘My mother wanted me to be a doctor. She wanted me to help others.’ Julia started. ‘My father wanted me to be a teacher, like him. But I don’t want to help anyone. I don’t like people. I wanted to leave. I always have this itch to leave, to run away. From everything.’

‘It’s all too much. All the other things I could have been.’ Emotion clogged Julia’s voice. ‘They were there, dancing to all those different sounds. I feel like I am reaching, always reaching, but the muscles in my arm have been cut, and I can’t close my fingers around anything. Like I am separated from all this living by glass, looked in at by no one. Because no one can see. I want to cut myself out of my body and just ...’ Julia’s went quiet. ‘

Sometimes,’ Julia turned to Yui then. ‘I want to be something else. Why can’t I be something else?’

Yui remembered the aquarium visit with her grandmother. Traces of other memories infiltrated the aquarium, feeding the *koi* in the water near her house, waiting for Ryota in her school uniform, her cutting up some shoes once. How the material compressed against the blade and then they were no longer shoes.

‘Am I supposed to let all those versions of me go and be happy with this one?’

Laughter reverberated through the buildings somewhere in the distance. Strangers moved through the city.

‘I am so tired. How do I make myself real, Yui? What am I to do with all this leftover feeling?’

Yui took Julia’s hand.

-

Hugo and Manon were sprawled out over the couches in the living room, eating crackers and cheese they found in the disorganized mess in their cupboards. The effects of drunkenness were diffusing off their otherwise uncomfortable looking bodies, discolouring the couches with brandy infused sweat. Hugo offered them some greeting in French, moving only his head to see the girls come in. Manon laughed, and Yui realized they were being teased.

A conversation was had in French and Yui waited dumbly, then resigned for a glass of water.

‘Is it Jägermeister or Tequila then, Yui?’ Hugo spoke up into the ceiling.

‘Leave her alone.’ Manon didn’t have the energy to hit him.

Then another conversation. The first statement aroused lots of curiosity in Julia and she asked a question and was then deflated by the answer. Yui turned to face them, leaning against the sink.

‘What did they say?’

‘They said they tried to go to the heaven floor.’

‘Oh, and?’

‘There was nothing there. It was just an empty attic.’

They retreated to bed and in the dark could hear Hugo and Manon arguing and giggling. An hour passed and Yui couldn’t sleep. The alcohol was already poisoning her body, and she could feel her muscles and brain starting to hurt. She turned in the covers, but couldn’t get comfortable, listening to the drunk city die down into a quiet grave before the morning busses. A quiet knock on her door.

‘I can’t sleep.’ Julia had said through the opening in the door. ‘Can I lie here with you.’

Yui lifted her duvet and Julia climbed in. Her feet were cold against hers, but the rest of her was warm, like a hot water bottle that softened the ache in her. They lay facing each other for a minute.

‘Tell me things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Start at the beginning.’

They lay there, telling stories about their lives, until the birds woke and called to the leaving dark. And they fell asleep, their fingers touching.

-

‘Are you gonna tell me his name?’ Rika fluttered her eyebrows goofily at Yui from across the *yakininku* restaurant table.

‘Whose name?’ Yui replied with a piece of meat hanging from her lips.

‘The boy you loved in Dublin.’

‘Are you gonna eat or just keep looking at me with that dumb face?’

‘Oh please. You have to tell me his name. Please, please.’

Sadness washed over Yui’s expression. She looked down and touched her nose.

-

The exhibition was nothing like she expected. It was all a rather ostentatious performance of circling cranes, bending their knees at ridiculous angles as if to show how easily they could sink their talons into whoever was in front of them. The art, the photographs, they were admired only briefly, before the guests turned their necks away to the Caprese bites and white wine that went down the throat like acid.

A local gallery was rented out by some CEO type. Rumour was she liked to pretend she was into art and hosted exhibitions for the benefit of her ego. This all the word of another photographer who took a liking to Rika and spilled his opinions in front of her like a klutz. Rika politely nodded, hiding her discomfort and looked passed him at all the guests.

For most of the guests, it seemed, their concern was not the photography, nor what the photographs could have said about existence, or those feelings only the grave of a photograph could hold. But rather who would purchase what was priced as the most expensive image and what other absurdly expensive items these birdlike things acquired in the recent months. They all seemed to know each other as they strode through the white room like it was the clouded house of their divinity. Its faint air of dull experimental electronic music inflating the hall with more ethereality.

Yui had never been more nervous. Everything in her was trembling before the exhibition opened. She skipped breakfast, but still felt as though she were about to hurl something up as she waited in the lobby of the exhibition hall that morning. But now, her nausea was doubled with another kind of sickness altogether, an acrid dislike for the plastic bodies draped in their lavish dresses, baggy designer clothes, and jewelled extremities, all of which sedated her nausea then amplified it. It was not like her to feel such disgust for others, but something about this was sickening and she skulled what wine she could, to kill the feeling with the acid liquid and try to forget how all these creatures were about to see her half undressed.

You could scoop all the pretentiousness out of the air with your hands and empty it into a bucket. Yui wasn't sure if she wanted to be sick or if she wanted to laugh, loudly, her teeth showing like a dog. She hated

herself then for letting Rika use her photograph.

She'd avoided her photograph all day and but couldn't get rid of the compass of discomfort in her body pointing towards it, dragging her to it and demanding it be taken off the walls. The guests, however failed to recognize her as the subject because the cranes didn't seem to care about her nude in a park bathroom cubicle. They didn't seem to care about anything but themselves and their own feathers. This eased Yui's anxiety and something of an imperviousness thickened around her with each passing minute.

'Are you having fun, Yui?' Rika looked tired. She'd been bouncing around charming all the devils in the room with her personality, pandering to their interests and bowing politely to the few comments that were made about her photographs of passed out businesspeople around the city.

'Yes, of course.' Yui didn't want to worry her with the truth.

Perhaps it had something to do with a perverse pleasure in watching the desperation in others that attracted the guests to these events, or perhaps they were there to avoid tax by becoming a benefactor for some artist they vaguely admired for the way they spoke or dressed, but not really for what they created.

'I can tell you're lying.' Rika said this into her ear. 'I think I hate these people. Tell me we are going to fill our stomachs later with outrageously good food so I can feel better.'

'We are going to fill our stomachs with the best food you can imagine.'

Rika sighed. Art was a game for collectors and beggars. The artists being the beggars, with their hands out asking more of life, of body and brain and feeling, and receiving only coins from these beaked and feathery

people, who looked and laughed at them like monkeys with steel cups.

‘If I faint, don’t panic. It’s just a strategy to get out of here, okay? Come get me and we can run away.’ Rika bumped Yui’s hips with hers affectionately, then continued her rounds.

She couldn’t imagine artists buying groceries or talking about the weather with their families. They didn’t feel like real people. Perhaps Rika was too ordinary to be an artist, with too much of a manageable history behind her and too cute a personality, too pretty to make meaningful things. These crows seemed to adore beauty from ugliness more than beauty from beauty. Beauty from itself was somehow a transgression of sorts, a stepping on their talons.

All these musings curled Yui’s face into a frown. She blew imaginary bubbles from her lips to break the false seriousness of it all. The other guests failed to notice her, too caught up in atmosphere with their glossy eyes, detached and full of disinterest in anything but themselves. She watched her friend bow to some of them now, an old couple, wrinkled and fat, pinching Rika’s arm with their nails.

Yui thought she’d take another look at all the photographs around the room, avoiding her own of course. The white partitions and white wall and white diaphanous faces were stifling, but Yui managed to erase them from her periphery and pretended she was just in a normal gallery.

Of all the artists she admired, her favourites were a guy who photographed empty expanses of the city, a girl whose subjects were always a stranger in the distance, doing something perfectly ordinary. Another guy who somehow captured his subjects in base, almost animalistic moments, some of which were sexual, neither erotic nor repulsive though. And, of course, Rika’s photographs. Yui adored the

fatigued loneliness of the drunk business suits in the city. Sometimes they were funny, others not so much as they showed the defeated faces of nameless strangers dissolving into the city.

And then Yui stood in front of herself. The image was the size of a window. She only just realized it was the central piece of Rika's corner of the exhibition, and the biggest, just as she explained over their celebration *yakiniku*. It didn't feel like a reflection of her – the photograph. Her expression in the image looked unfamiliar and it had been edited to soften the colours, to frame her body in the shadows of the cubicle. She had to avoid unconsciously covering her real nipples when she looked at the image, but no one had identified the model as her, if they even took a second to examine the photograph.

Then for a second, she quietly hoped they'd all stare, that they'd find her gorgeous and desirable in the ugly block of bricks and wood. First, she wanted to burn the exhibition down with herself in it to avoid her image being seen, and for a crazed interval she was sad no one was looking at her. It irritated her that she vacillated like this. From embarrassment, to terror, to sadness, to frustration and now to a terrible feeling of loneliness as she imagined herself a diminished dot in the vast image of the city.

Someone approached the photograph and was standing next to her, but she was too embarrassed to look and was about to walk away in the opposite direction.

'So, this is who you are?' The English and accent were immediately recognizable.

She looked quickly and recognized the lanky figure of Charlie standing next to her.

'All the other photographs are of suits, but you're just topless in a

room where strangers relieve themselves.'

'I guess when you put it that way, it is a bit weird.' Something sunk to the bottom of Yui's lungs. Charlie didn't say anything but moved closer to the picture as if looking for scars on her body. Yui wanted to run away but had nowhere to run to.

'I like your socks.'

Yui looked down but then realized he was talking about the green donut socks that were lying in the back of the image.

'Thanks. What are you doing here?'

'I'm here with Ryota.' Charlie looked over his shoulder to the dreamy, chiselled swimmer that stood in the middle of the exhibition listening to his sister like he himself was on display as art.

'We just finished de-rigging a set a couple stations down.'

'Oh.'

'Nice boobs, Yui.' Ryota teased, his tongue mischievously hanging out of his mouth.

'Shut up!' Yui turned immediately and tried to push him away with both her hands. All she managed was to make him briefly lose his footing as he giggled, and she blushed feverously.

They huddled together like old friends, chatting about things, Charlie's arms crossed, Ryota unconsciously touching his lip and Rika asking for translations when anyone chose English over Japanese.

They stayed like this for a while, eating whatever bird sized foods passed them on gilded trays. Looking at Charlie, Yui thought he didn't look out of place. He wore clothes from UniQlo and GU. His posture was close to Japanese. Even his hair was clearly cut by a Japanese barber, someone in the business districts perhaps. It was strange to see how he

adapted, how he somehow became less a thorn in the image as Yui.

But there was something off about him. He was paler than before, and Yui thought he'd lost weight. He held eye contact for shorter amounts of time and was nearly as quiet as Ryota. He hadn't touched any of the snacks floating around the exhibit. Something had changed him, or rather, gave an aspect of airlessness, like the space around him was a vacuum. Yui thought of how Ryota nearly drowned as a child and was then different.

'Will you let me photograph you sometime, Charlie?' Rika shoved a canape in her mouth.

'Well, I don't wear suits, but okay. *Wait. Are you inviting me to undress in a cubicle for you?*'

'What did he say?' She turned to Yui, embarrassed for some reason. More so, when Yui translated.

'Eh, no no no.' She almost choked on the canape and Yui, Ryota and Charlie laughed at her.

An imperious but lustrous voice floated out above the heads of the exhibition guests. It belonged to a lady dressed in a designer suit, with smoky makeup and hair that dangled to her waist. The folds next to her eyes were the only indication that she was somewhere in her 50's, the rest of her looked immortal, ageless, and the room was rendered helpless to her voice.

'Thank you all for joining us today. I am sure you have all sated your appetites and replenished yourselves of the lustre of the living image.' She gestured to the artworks around her. Yui wanted to hate her, but some trick of the light, or perhaps some chemical in the wine made it impossible as she introduced herself as if she were the saint of photography, reminding the guests that the photographs could be purchased and of other

administrative information.

‘There remains, however, one curiosity to be quenched.’ She continued. ‘Those with an itch for capturing the average days of Tokyo know, however faintly, that the image is an attempt to pause time, to make infinite what passes to memory before the shutter closes.’ The audience was drooling from their beaks, keeping their proud claws retracted for the time being. Rika rolled her eyes at Yui, and they all suppressed a laugh.

‘Let us then challenge the art, make art of its intentions.’

‘*What is going on?*’ The verbose Japanese left Charlie completely in the dark and Yui lightly touched his forearm.

‘*I don’t know.*’

‘We’ve asked the photographers to bring with them their instruments and have deleted all the photographs on display here today.’ Talons unsheathed for a brief second and Yui thought she could hear them scratching against the marble floor.

‘So, what you see around you, exists only in print on these walls.’ The lady paused and the guests were again placated by her empyrean skin.

‘What, say then, we offer an opportunity of destruction in this chamber of creation and through it, create a new experience, a new kind of art. I invite an artist, just one, to select an image of theirs and destroy it. Irrevocably.’

The feathers of the guests fluttered as if in arousal and the artists withdrew into themselves, into their fears.

‘I know it is quite the thing to ask of a creator; to destroy what they love most. But is that not sufficient a reason; to create here in this room a new kind of art; to take something designed to be as close to forever as we can manage, and tear it apart, make it transient, tenuous, like the eyes that

first saw in the scene something to be captured.’

Quiet chatter started in the crowd, questioning, condescending glances were given to the artists who were almost all looking away, waiting for something to save them from this. All but Rika, who was naively eating another canape she stole off a table. Yui took the pause to quickly catch Charlie up who looked as though he was going to be sick, but, if from the invitation for destruction, or something else, Yui couldn’t tell.

‘Anyone? No one?’ Nothing from the artists. ‘How about you?’ She approached Rika. ‘What would a beautiful creature like you need of permanence.’ The lady ran the back of her fingers down Rika’s cheek. ‘Will you destroy your art for us?’

‘No.’ Rika’s answer fell to the floor as she swallowed more food. Yui laughed and hid her face behind Charlie’s back.

‘Oh, but I think you will.’ The woman’s hair gave her movements a serpentine quality, as she took Rika’s hand into hers. ‘What if I were to offer you 300,000 yen? Ten times the amount of anything here.’

‘No, thank you.’ The effects of the woman infiltrated Rika’s body and she began to look trapped, poisoned into stasis. Her eyes remained indifferent however. She let go of Rika and returned to her position in the middle of the crowd.

‘Do you see, dear guests, how we clutch to permanence? How silly we are, how naïve. How we will do anything just to not be forgotten. But death follows so closely.’ She drifted to a different artist across the room, the older man who took a liking to Rika and told her about the event when she arrived. He looked the sort who would’ve looked more at home restoring broken things in his garage than at a photography exhibition.

‘And we will do anything to push it away. Won’t we?’

From the inside pocket of her suit jacket, the host produced a lighter and placed it in the palm of the man’s hand. ‘Destroy one of her photographs and the money is yours.’ Aquiline faces turned to see the girl, Rika’s, reaction, their bodies writhing under their feathery clothing. Rika fastened a furious look at the man as he closed his hand around the lighter.

‘Which photographs are hers?’ His diminished, pathetic question was answered by numerous arms lifting and pointing in the direction of Rika’s photographs, of Yui’s nude form in the cubicle.

‘Please, don’t.’

But he dragged himself over to Rika’s photographs and then examined the lighter in his pudgy fingers.

‘One last offer, child. Destroy your photograph and I’ll give you double the original amount.’

‘I’ll burn your clothing for that amount.’ A subtle rage issued out of Rika’s riposte. The feathers bristled with delight.

‘I like you.’ The lady leered at her and then turned to the other photographer, holding the lighter as if it were the most dangerous thing on the planet. ‘Continue.’

‘Please. Don’t.’ Rika spoke quickly. ‘You can’t’.

The gentleman’s neck rotated around the room hysterically, turning in its rolls, looking for an answer in the faces of the guests. Anxiety caused him to shake, and he dropped the lighter. He tried to pick it up, but the horror of the scene made his fingers useless. He dropped it again, sweat falling off his bushy brow.

‘Just leave it, sir. Kick it away from her.’

The photographer carefully cupped his hands around the lighter and

lifted it, dropping it into the lady's hand, much to her disappointment. 'I am sorry. I cannot.' He bowed apologetically.

Then Rika addressed the lady. 'We are not as desperate as you think.'

The audience looked around, waiting for a conclusion. Something was said to the photographer that the room couldn't hear, and a look of desperation fell on his expression. He took the lighter into his pudgy fingers again and turned to Rika.

'I am so sorry.' Something in him broke and he bowed as deep as he could without falling to the ground.

Rika tried to push herself through the crowd. But they wouldn't let her through, determined to witness the burning of her photograph as the man ignited the lighter and held it against the corner of Yui's photograph.

'No, don't!' Rika screamed. The sound of the lighter setting off ignited all the terror in Yui as she watched her friend push the guests, trying to save her photograph. But she couldn't get through their plumage and lost her footing against their half-real faces, looking on with vicious intrigue. All the eyes and beaks of the exhibition guests turned. They craned their legs and inhaled the burning. The orange of the flame turned blue, then green and then orange again. Fragments of the photograph flaked off and fell.

By the time Rika reached her photograph, Yui's body was charred and ashen. Her slate eyes looked out of the flame and then disappeared. Rika looked on in horror, tears falling from her.

Rika looked back with venom at the gallery and then fought through the crowd to the exit. The crowd applauded and smiled and licked their lips.

-

After her eyes adjusted to the light, and the exhibition door clicked into a close, Yui could see Rika on a bench in the distance just before an arcade of neon green leaves curling around a metal archway that sloped off toward the complex entrance. The light distorted the ends of her as if she was diffusing into it, fading away into the white. Yui raised her forearm to shield herself from it then moved towards her friend. She reached the end of the arcade and wanted to touch Rika, but searched for words instead.

‘Rika, I ...’

‘Why?’ Her voice faltering. ‘Why did they do that?’

Yui lowered herself next to Rika and held her.

Royta caught up.

‘And you!’ Rika pointed furiously, pushing Yui off her. ‘You did nothing, you could’ve stopped them, but you did nothing! You always do *nothing!*’ Her voice was venomous. ‘What is the point of being that size if you don’t do anything? You’re just an empty space. You just ...’ Yui pulled her back into her and tried again to calm her.

Yui would never have expected that her imagining the gallery in flames would become somewhat of a reality, that a gossamer applause would be the music to the burning photograph, to the disintegration of her own image. She felt hollowed out, her insides ash. She caught herself holding on to Rika not out of comfort but necessity. Their breaths slowed and synchronized.

‘I am sorry about your photograph, Yui.’

‘I am sorry to, Rika. You tried to save it.’

Ryota got on his haunches next to them and wiped the tear trailing down his sister’s face. ‘I am sorry, little sister.’

‘We can take others.’ Yui tried to console her.

‘Yeah, others. But never a photograph like that again.’ Rika’s tone was uncharacteristically flat, crushed almost and Yui realized there were parts of her friend she’d never seen. She wondered if anyone was trying to capture them as they were now with a lens.

‘Where’s Charlie?’ Rika sniffed.

Ryota turned and looked to the gallery door for his friend.

‘I’ll go find him.’

The mood of the exhibition hall returned to a stale back and forth of nodding and inconsequential conversation about who spent what to acquire some important artifacts, like a state-of-the-art air fryer, or a crossbody bag designed by Issey Miyake. But Ryota couldn’t find him amongst the white orchard faces of the guests. He checked the adjacent rooms, the foyer and then the bathroom, but nothing.

After collecting Rika’s camera from the back room, he doublechecked the bathroom, heard water crawling its way up someone’s throat and out into the porcelain bowl. Ryota said nothing. When Charlie exited the cubicle, Ryota gave him a napkin from the basket next to the basin and they made for the exit. Yui was waiting for them.

‘Where were you? I was looking for you both.’

‘He got lost in the building.’ Ryota quickly answered for him.

‘Come, let’s get Rika out of here.’

When they returned to where Rika was sitting, she had disappeared and they couldn’t find her in the vicinity.

‘I think I know where she is going.’

Yui and Charlie followed Ryota. They took the three trains to the warehouse district in the harbour. Yui thought of Rika on the trains, her

eyes red and fists like hammers, ignoring the other passengers, looking out into the daylight – if Ryota was right about where she was. They travelled together in silence.

They got off at Asano station and followed the harbour edge. Ryota wanted to help the others. He looked back at Yui who folded her arms around her and was looking out into the water, melancholy hanging on her face. And Charlie, who looked pale. He cursed his inability to get his hands around their emotions and hold them together, keep them from falling off them like dying leaves.

‘We are almost there.’

‘Why am I always following you, Ryota.’ Charlie tried to joke.

The tubby security guard at the studio gates greeted Ryota like he was his favourite nephew and Yui thought he was going to hug him. They exchanged some small talk and Yui had never seen Ryota behave as he did. It was odd but refreshing.

‘Is she here?’

‘She is here, Ryota-kun.’ The guard rubbed his belly as if he just finished a bowl of spicy *gyoza*.

‘Thank you.’

The studio lot was empty.

A couple eighteen-wheelers were idling next to an open warehouse door, but there was no one there. The doors at the back hung open and revealed the bare skeleton of the truck.

At the end of the lot, a balled-up figure waited in front of a studio door. As they approached, Yui realized it was Rika.

‘It’s locked.’

‘It’s always locked when we aren’t filming, you know that.’ Ryota

removed the keys from his pocket and unlatched the doors. He needed his whole body to move them. ‘There. You can go inside.’

Rika got to her feet and entered the studio without speaking to the others.

‘So, this is where you make your fake worlds, Ryota?’ Yui followed the others sheepishly, her voice echoing out into the studio.

‘Something like that.’

Yui could not help but feel the wake of sadness Rika left behind, the traces of anger, the tension in her body.

Charlie flipped the switches just down the way and the lights came on in a sequence, illuminating the set in sections. The spaces that weren’t housing the set were a mess, an unimaginable number of objects whose relations to each other weren’t immediately obvious: wooden ramps, metallic braziers, teapots, plants, fake food, and an ungodly amount of wiring.

The set itself was a more haunting space than the innocent studio. It was a desert of sorts, an empty flatness of grey and ochre veined rocks that looked as though they’d ruptured the studio floor and were coming out of the earth beneath it. There was a ruin in the middle of the set, the remnants of a wall or a tower perhaps, made of stone bricks that were dipped in the moon’s waters, a lonely blue-black that would be invisible just as night arrived. Charlie could almost hear a wind buffeting the ruin when he looked at it and Yui could not imagine how they crated the space. It looked so real, like nothing Yui had walked through before, even with the green screen arced around half its circumference.

‘What are you filming here?’

‘The director uses words like avant-garde, philosophical art-house,

but its none of those things, really. Just a job. Right, Charlie?’

‘Just a job.’ He repeats, aloof but with a touch of dishonesty.

Rika was already examining all the objects in the studio.

They moved through the studio slowly, lifting props and tools and running their hands over surfaces, examining everything with the unfamiliarity of aliens. Rika lifted a drill, a normal hand drill and looked at it like it had features she could not dream of. For Ryota, it was just a site, an office almost. He helped build what they were walking through and there was little charm in it for him, the way everything you create loses its magic because you know the architecture behind it, its failings, and flaws, the bloodstains on the wood where Charlie cut his forearm.

For Charlie, it was a mix of feelings, as everything was. A part of him adored being in film and creating whatever worlds they could imagine. Another part of him thought it wasteful, pointless and he vacillated between a suspension of disbelief and the unromantic view of it as a site of fake names, fake movements and fake contact lenses. Unable to decide if he was here or there.

Rika found an array of costumes hanging on dumb valets. There were close to 20 options. They weren’t eye-catching, they were rather dull, really; frayed robes the colours of the set’s rock formations, gloves of coiled cloth with leather fingertips, and desert scarves adorned in little images of flowers and creatures Rika couldn’t recognize. But it was the masks that intrigued her, weird and round ghostly masks with black gaping holes for eyes and a mouth, as if the ghost was afraid of the other masks. She slowly lifted one of the dumb valets and disappeared behind a wooden partition that was half the height of the spacious studio.

‘*You helped make all this?*’ Yui had made her way into the middle of

the set touching the ruin curiously.

‘*Yeah.*’ Charlie answered. The cut stones were hollow, plastic; fake comfort, Charlie thought as he watched her from the periphery of the set, his arms crossed defensively.

Ryota busied himself by organizing some tools. Things fell over somewhere behind the wood partition.

‘I am okay. Nothing is broken.’ Rika said, her voice swallowed up by all the space. It was quiet for a second, then from behind a different wooden divider, Rika appeared and screamed, a deathly scream.

‘Fuck, Rika, what is wrong with you.’ Yui got such a fight she took cover behind the ruin walls.

A mixture of anger and laughter came out of the disturbing mask, all the more unsettling with its black eyes and mouth. The costume she chose was a torn, ripped robe of a fading white; holy once, but now coming apart at the ends like the ends of a spectre, dragging up a grey dust as it dragged on the floor. Designed to be worn with the desert scarves, without one, Rika’s neck looked elongated, vascular, ready to swallow the world down it. She tapped the leather fingertips against the cheek of her mask.

‘How do I look?’

‘Horrible.’ Rika touched Yui’s face with the coarse ends of the gloves.

‘Why did you come here, Rika?’ Yui asked.

‘When you were gone, Rika would visit often.’ Ryota looked up.

‘Oh, Memory.’ Ryota moved up next to Charlie.

‘What are you saying, brother?’

‘You chose memory - the costume you’re wearing.’

‘Why does memory look so scary?’ Yui asked.

‘Are you guys not dressing up?’ The screaming mask observed them with its terrible black eyes.

‘What are the other options?’ Yui turned to Ryota and Charlie.

‘Abstract things.’

‘Bodyless things that aren’t really good for anything, that don’t really do anything. This film is missing something basic, like a mechanic.’

‘Or a swimmer?’ Rika’s voice was uncharacteristically serious. ‘You let my photograph die. I won’t forget that. You refuse to be a part of this world and are just as unreal as those things because of it.’ Rika pointed to the costumes and Ryota looked away, without emotion.

‘You’re not dressing up, Charlie?’

‘Of course not.’

‘What would you choose to be if you did?’ Charlie thought for a second and in the pause, Rika turned away from her brother lifting her robe into a bloom, like a dress. She turned again, trying to get it to lift higher.

‘I don’t know.’

‘There must be something.’

‘I would be Death. And always come late, come slowly and with kindness.’ Ryota answered having made his choice when he first saw the drafts for the costumes.

‘What did he say?’ Yui translated for Rika. ‘Well, you let death come quickly to my art. You’d just be death with no alterations.’

‘What about you, Yui?’

Yui was leaning back into her hands, looking up through the rafters of the set, passed the lighting rigs and scaffolding, and into the dark behind it all. She thought about it for a second.

‘I think I’d be Longing.’

Rika didn’t need a translation. She understood the last word just from how Yui said it.

‘Longing for what?’

‘Home.’ She answered into the rafters.

‘Would you find it?’

Yui looked back down at Charlie. *‘I don’t know.’*

Rika returned to the dumb valets. The sponge body of Memory looked vulnerable, exposed without the costume on it. Rika kicked it and it fell to ground.

‘Rika, please.’ Ryota’s voice flooded the studio.

‘Sorry brother.’ She restored the valet and then awkwardly hugged it. *‘I was just trying to help. I just wanted everyone to see how beautiful we are. How Yui’s otherness could be art. I’ve only ever tried to help. But I guess I tried to much, pushed too much. I should’ve just left it.’*

Yui dragged her knees into her chest, trying to reduce her body to as liminal a size as she could.

‘I am sorry, Rika.’

‘Me too.’ Everything in the studio paused. Then Rika continued. *‘You always told me how you wanted to know what you were. I just tried to show everyone, tried to show you what you were. But I guess the world has no interest in what we are.’* Rika moved over cables and tools. *‘If you are Death, brother, then you are also Forgetting, right?’* She put the mask on him carefully, half fearing what he would become. *‘Make us forget.’*

‘What would you want to forget?’

Dublin. Yokohama. Photographs of her mother, her digital voice. A blood nose and curls. Yui remembered the minerals of an *onsen* and the

words that floated on the surface of the water. The impression left by her mother on her *futon* after she was gone. Not knowing her father's name. How it all overlapped and then divided into too many parts to carry. Too many parts for anyone to bare. The unbearable weight of trying.

'Nothing.' She answered.

The emptiness of the studio breathed around them.

'I am tired.' Rika lowered herself next to Yui. *'Take us home, Hope.'* She fell onto Yui playfully. Yui laughed and tried to shoulder her off. *'Take us home, Ache.'* Then, breaking character, *'Am I guessing what you would be correctly?'*

Ryota collapsed onto the two girls, and they groaned under his weight, pushing the air left in their lungs out with complaints and laughter.

'Take us home, Longing.'

Charlie tensed. He looked at them, a heap of laughter and silliness, Yui trying to wriggle herself out from under them. His limbs moved to lift him off the set, but he stopped himself and looked away. He wanted to be a part of something, a part of them.

'Take us home.' They howled.

Take us home.

Chapter 6 – Episodes

Charlie closed the set doors.

When he turned to leave, he was caught off guard seeing Yui waiting at the entrance of the set complex, awkwardly swinging her hands at her sides, looking around nervously. He thought she'd left with Ryota and Rika after all the chaos of the burning photograph. He remained to finish some admin things he wanted to get done before returning to set.

'Where are the others?'

'Oh, they left already.' She looked as though she were about to say something. A little silly really.

'Do you ... eh?' Charlie guessed.

'Yeah, I do.'

The tension in Yui's body left her. The drop of her shoulders set off the gate sensor and caused the boom next to her to lift. She got a fright and Charlie laughed at her.

'Are you hungry?'

'Always.'

The boom opened again, and they left, Charlie waving at the security guard who was watching baseball on the monitor in his booth. He didn't notice them leave.

-

The ends of the curtain lifted with the night wind. *Lawson Blue* and *24Times Parking Yellow* flooded the floor. Yui wiggled her socks in the colours before the light retreated and was replaced with nagging feelings that made sleep a silly, impossible thing. She rolled her duvet around her and moved about the bed like a worm, waiting for the text from Charlie.

Her screen lit all the folds in her room. *Done. Home now.*

Yui locked the screen, the ring she never takes off in her lips, tonguing its metallic form. Her synapses rushed with that curious combination of excitement and nerves that made her belly turn.

With 11 minutes to spare, did you win?

Always.

Are you ready? Yui locked the screen and dropped the duvet around her. Completing a full 360, she looked around as if for something, but there was nothing she needed, and the room black. She peeked out of her bedroom. Everything in the apartment block passage was off; there were no lights on, no tickings or beepings and for a second the world was a thing without electricity, without keyboards and searching.

Ready the white-blue of the screen again.

Yui positioned her cellphone against the heap of books she prepared before turning all the lights off, feeling her way through the dark to get to the angle right. Opening LINE, she looked at Charlie's text like it was made of him. The chemicals in her brain were rushing about in waves of wants, liquefying the feelings of missing someone, of craving someone until all her nerve endings were tingling with the memory of Charlie's last touch. She ran her fingertips over the text, reaching for him in the pixels.

Three more minutes.

Yui saw the *typing* notification in the chat and permutations of what he might say fell into her, turning and transforming in her limbs. Yui hovered over the call button waiting for his response, but the *typing* notification ended.

When midnight arrived, she pressed the video call button and listened to the dial tone. The tone sounded submerged, washed out by nerves and anticipation. The frame of the call opened, and Yui could see Charlie's face in the little cutout of light in her dark room.

Yui, I miss you. Wait, I can't see you. Are you there?

Yui searched her way through the dark for the light switch and clicked it on.

'Happy birthday, Charlie-kun!'

The room was filled with balloons. They bounced off of each other and Yui's body as she found her way back into the camera's view a touch awkwardly, the squeaks of rubber and Yui's excited wishes compressing into the microphone.

Yui, now almost all of her in the eye of the camera, waited for Charlie's reply.

Yui, this is amazing. Look at all the balloons.

'Can you see the banner, too?' Yui looked above her to a handmade happy birthday poster hanging across from the ends of her room.

I can see the bottom, I love it. The image broke up and Charlie returned a little more pixelated before the image reset. *I miss you so much.*

'I miss you too. How's the production going?'

A little behind schedule, but we are getting there.

'Is Kanazawa gorgeous?'

The connection broke again. Yui lifted the device with both her hands, trying to feel his cheeks in it, looking into the fragmenting image for him. The connection restored and they exchanged stories and updates of the week, telling each other what made them giggle, what caused them frustration and how they couldn't wait for Charlie to come back from the production.

Seven more days, just a week. Can you wait for me?

Yui shook her head.

'There's something I want to do for you.'

Like a gift?

Yui tried to smile the pink out of her cheeks and returned the camera to the books resting on her desk.

Are you gonna dance? A laugh issued out of the little speaker.

'Don't tease me, I'm trying to do something fun for you.' Yui rolled her eyes, something of a smile revealing she adored the tease. She framed as much of herself in the screen as she could, with a backdrop of balloons and the pine green painted wall of her new apartment. 'Don't make me laugh, okay?'

I'll try.

Yui undressed for him. They tried not to laugh, tried not to feel silly. The clothing came off her easily, lightly, and when they were dropped, kicked up balloons around her. It was hard to see if she was still framed correctly, the screen too far away, but she could see Charlie's digital eyes looking at her. She turned as if for a doctor, trying to show all of her to the camera, then knelt down back in front of the camera so she could see him better.

'What do you think?'

I really like the balloons.

Yui rolled her eyes again. ‘Of me, Charlie. Am I beautiful?’

Always.

Hearing this, her insides turned into cotton and electricity. She touched the screen. ‘I like showing you, am I weird?’

Yes and I adore you for it.

‘Okay, your turn. Undress birthday boy.’

Charlie laughed.

How is that a gift for me.

‘It’s not, it’s for me.’

Then he undressed for her. And they laughed some more, trying to awkwardly fit themselves in the screen so the other could see, performing, then forgetting, then asking things of each other they’d never asked anyone before, drinking in the light of each other’s disintegration into feeling.

They turned their lights off and were reduced to rectangles of colour in their emptied rooms, sometimes talking, sometimes waiting for the connection to restore, but in the end, both falling asleep over the call, light washing over their faces and pillows until their batteries died and everything a terrible distance apart.

-

Yui pulled Charlie into the house, pulled him into the vacant room that had a dusty piano and an empty birdcage. Then into the downstairs bathroom, where they washed their hands. A panel show roared on the television in the living room, the exaggerated expressions of the comedians and celebrities beaming what was usually amazement at trivial things from the corners of the monitors.

'I hate their dumb faces.' Yui told Charlie then took him to the table she set for their dinner; flowery napkins folded over three plates at a table for six. The space next to Mrs. Nishikawa's was empty.

Charlie remembered each room of the house. Downstairs: the living room and dining room, the guest bathroom, the cramped kitchen and drying dishes. Upstairs: Mrs. Nishikawa's room, which he'd never entered, the spare room, corner to corner with boxes labelled Akiko and Makoto. Graves of cardboard. Then a bathroom.

And, of course, Yui's room; her bed, the smell of her clothing, Postcards, almost a full wall of them from the museums she visited when she was in Dublin. The smudgy feverish colours of Yeats, the refined greens of Leech, some Renoirs, some Monet, a Lautrec, and a Hiroshige she found in a box labelled Akiko.

'It's not much but this is me.'

Artifacts of the girl he adored, traces of the little girl that became who she was now, the half Japanese woman who broke herself into bits and tried to rebuild herself from them.

Then they ate.

They drank.

'Hey, gallery boy, did you find a place for your art?' Mrs Nishikawa asked, all wrinkles and love. 'That's okay. Hers are the only eyes you will ever need.' *She gestured to Yui.*

And then one morning, Mrs. Nishikawa didn't wake up.

When Yui opened the door for Charlie, everything in her broke and she started to sob. Charlie climbed onto the couch next to her and held her as she heaved. Her words were broken up by all the things she didn't say to her grandmother.

'I hate them. I hate...' *She latched onto his jumper and tugged at it, trying to pull herself into him. '...their dumb faces'.* *Charlie reached for the television remote and pressed the exaggerated comedians and celebrity faces into darkness.*

'You can't leave.' *She begged. Charlie held her tighter. 'I am all alone.'* *He couldn't get her close enough, no matter how hard he tried.*

She'd sell the house, because there wasn't enough space in the vacant room upstairs for more boxes.

-

Tourists hovered around a selection of folding fans next to a sweet potato cake vendor. They opened them, examined the drawings, fanned their faces for photographs and laughed, buying nothing. The shop attendant lulled her heavy, wrinkled head in the dark corner in the back, dressed in a kimono and daydreaming about all the times she went on dates with chic, black haired boys who promised her everything all those years ago.

Charlie opened one of the folding fans. The fully extended fan had a traditional image of a girl in a *yukata*, looking out into a field. He knew it was Mrs. Nishikawa, somehow. It had to have been her. The paper and the bamboo of the *sensu* felt synthetic, plastic imitations of what they're supposed to be, but the image was moving, if not a little sad.

'2600 yen.' The attendant's dry lips coughed out the price. Charlie nodded and returned the folding fan.

But the impression of the image remained. Everything moved away from him, the space between things expanding. The wooden makeshift stores down the *Senso-ji* street, the tourists and locals, the windows overlooking the shops, the smell of baked goods, the wind – all of it just out of reach. Charlie could see Yui handing over the cash for some sweet potato cakes, but it looked like something from a photograph more than the reality of it, as if covered in a transparent resin, muting all the sounds, and intensifying the colours.

Yui tried to wink but couldn't really so she just double blinked. Charlie smiled and tried to swallow the sadness lumping in his throat. He'd been here once, in Yokohama. In Tokyo, here where he was now.

‘Round 2 of sweet potato cakes for fat us.’

Yui gave Charlie his and held back two for herself.

‘And that extra one?’

‘Shhhhh silly boy.’ She laughed, blonde hair hanging down just passed her angular jawline, the angular nose. There was something synthetic about her, something evasive, and you couldn’t help but feel a vague loneliness when you looked at her, her lower eyelids seemed to want to bury those eyes that never evaded his. She always looked at him like it might be the last time she saw him, with her grey eyes half blue in *Asakusa* light.

‘Are you okay?’

She took his hand. A hundred bodies moved around them like a nebulous mass of anonymity.

‘Get the green one.’ Yui’s hands were against the glass of the claw grabber. Her nails were black. Charlie thought her bony fingers were attractive. A series of odd thoughts about her fingers followed. He looked up her arm at her three tattoos: a Ghibli *No Face*, a jellyfish, and a fine line girl’s face with a nosebleed. The arcade’s beeping and 8bit music and mechanical voices droned on around them, adding an animation to all the colourful machines that was overstimulating and haunting.

‘Can you?’

‘Of course.’ Charlie jokingly warmed up.

‘Are you good at these?’ Yui smirked, leaning against the purple glowing claw grabber with teddies inside it.

‘Hond and I used to win a teddy every time. Five Rand teddies, we

used to call them.’ Charlie dropped a coin into the machine.

‘You give them to all your girlfriends?’

‘Yeah, that one.’

‘Okay.’

The claw descended and closed around the teddy Yui wanted. For the rest of the day, an awkward looking round blob of a teddy with uneven, goofy looking eyes watched Tokyo go by from Yui’s handbag. High school girls tried to record videos of their unenthusiastic dancing for social media in station courtyards. A blind couple followed the yellow groves next to the streets to get to the station, laughing about something, their arms locked as the traffic light changed. A lost Abyssinian cat turned its head at the teddy from atop a dumpster in an alley.

A thousand faces reflected in the black orbs of the teddy’s eyes, a thousand bodies perfectly dressed to show some inexpressible part of who they were, and how they wanted to be loved, how they wanted to watch the world with someone who brushed their teeth in some idiosyncratic way that only they knew, that only they loved and could imitate mockingly to their embarrassed but quietly happy partner.

I don't do that, do I?

You do Yui.

Of all the things he read, the episodes and short films Ryota and Charlie helped build, of all the paintings he anguished over and crafted with what colours and techniques he memorized in his fingers, nothing would ever be more gorgeous than these trivialities, all the little things we collect and call intimacy.

-

'My mother was very lonely. Something happened, something my grandmother wouldn't tell me about. But it embarrassed my mother. She was forced to leave her office, but the company continued to pay her for some reason. I think as a way to buy her silence. She didn't tell my grandmother. She woke each morning and left as if for the office, but just walked around the city with nothing to do. Loneliness became the order of her day.

'I asked as much as I could, but my grandmother didn't really know for how long either – or what the details of it were.

'She crafted another lie and said she was going on a business trip to Osaka. But really, she was alone in a plane for hours. Maybe looking out at the clouds or trying not to think. I imagine she cycled through the inflight films just to stop herself from asking the airhostess for a sedative. I've pictured it so many times.

'I don't know what country she went to, but when I think of her in the cab, unable to explain where she wanted to go in the foreign language, all of me hurts so much I want to vomit. She went to a clinic, I think, and waited for her turn, turning the pages of a waiting room magazine, acting as if she could read the words, but really just looking at the pictures.

I wonder if she was afraid when they called her. When they gave her the syringe with a stranger's DNA and she injected it into herself, because her world was empty, and she wanted to create her own.

'When she returned and her belly started to grow, my mother and grandmother fought almost every day, arguing about abortions and money and morality and a hundred other little things because they were both angry, angry at the reality of it all.

'When I was ready to come out, the hospital was so full of patients there was no doctor to take care of her, to make sure everything was okay. And, after they took me out of her, my mother haemorrhaged and died in the room. When the horrified nurse called my grandmother in, they gave me to her, but she couldn't take her eyes off her dead daughter and all the black-red. I still don't know why they called her into the room.

'The first night out of the hospital, I cried cushioned in a duvet in the bedroom while my grandmother washed the dishes for the fourth time, her waterlogged body unable to quiet me. Just after 2am, she gathered all the leftover love she had for my mother and lowered herself onto the futon next to me and cupped my cheek.

'She apologized and cried with me, until our chests were empty. We fell asleep in the futon my mother used just a couple nights ago, the trace of her mixing with the dry aroma of tatami. This is how my grandmother describes my first night home with her. I asked so many times that it feels like a memory. Sometimes, I think I can still feel the impression of my mother's body in the mattress. But as I grew, I overwrote her impression with my own.'

Yui dropped a piece of chocolate in her mouth, her head resting in Charlie's lap. The film Little Woman was playing in the background with the volume lowered to almost inaudible.

'When I started to read, I tried to read as much English as I

could, thinking it could have been the language of my father, thinking, for some dumb reason, that it was a part of me. I thought I left for Dublin to find him, but really, it just made more sense to feel like a stranger halfway across the world, than here, than home.'

-

‘Is it starting?’

‘Wait. A couple more minutes.’ Yui touched the fluff of hair over Charlie’s fringe, looking down into her lap at the cut on his nose, the dots of grey in his blue eyes.

The wooden balcony of the abandoned house looked out over the Sumida River. Thousands of bodies shuffled passed each other next to the grey water, trying to find what space they could on the raised riverbank. From the balcony, it looked as if the surface of Tokyo was moving, the riverside covered with suits, *yukatas* and all the colours of summer passing through arches of paper ornaments in the shapes of gods.

‘I still can’t believe she refuses to sell this place. She’d make a crazy amount of money.’ Rika was lying on cushions against the wooden wall of the house, her brother on her left, Yui and Charlie on her right.

‘Some things are hard to let go of Rika.’ Ryota smoked a cigarette, looking up into the black sky with the rest of Tokyo. Boats floated on the water, dotting it with lanterns and white lit faces haunting the water with eyes blinking in the grey.

‘But there is nothing here for her. It’s just an empty thing.’

Royta looked at her and Rika remembered the coral they found at *Koshigoe* beach, how they looked like emptied out hives, how Rika cried when her father threw the coral out when she was away at a baseball tournament, how the quiet presence of her brother helped her stop crying. He looked at her like he always did, as if he was terribly far away.

Ryota thought of the construction sites he visited with his father when he was little; the dull cement architecture of something unfinished

looked unremarkable, but necessary. Some things were better empty.

‘Why don’t you buy it Charlie?’ Rika joked.

Charlie half laughed, searching for the Japanese words to respond.
‘I’d like to.’

‘Then you and Yui can get married, and you won’t have to leave.’

Rika continued.

The couple said nothing.

‘We’re all thinking it.’

‘Rika.’ Ryota tried to stop his sister.

Rika reached for a box of *jagariko* chips sticks, lifting her knees to her chest with the box and throwing some in her mouth.

‘I could wear a dress and throw flowers at the pretty foreign boys Charlie invites.’ She imitated this with the chips, throwing them into an empty box in the corner of the balcony. ‘Ryota could brood in the corner and still catch the attention of the girls. And these two could...’

‘Stop, Rika. Please.’ Yui’s voice was drawn. Rika was not used to hearing it like that and quietened herself to just the crunching of *jagariko* chips.

Yui touched Charlie’s lips, looked away and Charlie closed his eyes.

A metallic hiss echoed through the spaces above the river.

‘It’s starting. Rika rolled onto her knees and rested her fingers on the banister. The box of *jagariko* chips fell off her lap and fell through the gaps in the wood.

All eyes searched for where the colours would begin but couldn’t tell the trajectory of the sound. Then a bloom of orange light exploded above them, branching out like a constellation, and then fading into smoke.

‘I am so excited.’

‘Can you see?’ Yui asked Charlie.

He lifted himself up and reversed into her arms, reaching back and touching her cheek.

Another three colours exploded over the city. Tokyo paused to look, paused to see the compositions and how they faded, the memory of grey smoke drifting away through the buildings. Then, a thousand hisses and colours painted the night. Colours navigated each other like sailors in black waters and fell to the earth like lines of coloured wakes.

‘They’re perfect, don’t you think?’ Rika looked deeply into the fireworks, then, as if suddenly becoming aware of herself, down into the groups of friends and families drinking and eating and laughing in the glow.

‘Did you have fireworks like this where you came from, Charlie? In Lüderitsu?’ She looked back up at the fireworks.

‘No.’

‘No? What did you have?’

‘We did have little fireworks, *handheld things you lit and threw a couple metres in front of you. But there were no colours, just a bang. We blew up my grandmother’s window when we were messing around with them, and the wind blew in dust over her antique furniture. I thought she was going to kill us.*’ He looked at Yui when he ran out of Japanese, and answered the question as if she asked it, laughing at her smile.

‘What did he say?’

‘They had handheld fireworks.’

‘I see.’ Rika dropped her chin onto her forearms and her eyes fell on the horizon and the bridge that arced over the river.

There was a raised platform built from where they were setting off

the fireworks on the bridge. Dark figures moved over it, lifting and carrying things. They lined up and ignited torches simultaneously, bringing down the line of flames to bamboo cylinders that caught the flame in their bellies, paused for a second, then showered the silhouettes of carriers in a metallic rain. Rika was too far away to make out anything other than their outlines. They looked like shadows, invulnerable to the fiery rain they held, dancing in the array of fireworks dazzling its audience into a numb trance of beauty.

‘Do you think they’re afraid of getting burnt?’

A layer of smoke fogged the spaces between the viewers and the colours, smudging them, mixing the colours of fireworks and *yukata*’s and paper gods, like a pastel drawing. All the realness was rubbed away and the faces of Tokyo turned translucent in the light and smoke, floating in the darkness like happy spirits, smiling because they’d been remembered and were now only half liminal, eating pork and *onigiri* as if it could fill them.

From various spaces in the scene, from the riverbanks, the boats and rooftops, crowds started to light their own little fireworks. They shot up from the mass of bodies and the riverbank became a bed of sparking flowers. And Charlie watched the colours fracture the grey, return the image to normality for a second – little pockets of living – before the dispersion of smoke overwrote it and the pastel world returned. Ryota lit another cigarette and added to the dissolution.

‘Are you going to paint this, Charlie? Like the Hiroshige postcard on your wall?’ Rika asked looking at two girls lighting a firework together and aiming it up above them.

‘Maybe.’ Yui’s arms tightened around his chest.

‘Yeah, maybe.’ Rika echoed unconsciously.

A charred piece of paper landed in front of Ryota. He lifted himself from his pillows and pressed his finger into the paper. It disintegrated and left its charcoal print on his finger. He pressed it to his thumb, and transferred the black ash, the ends of his fingers disappearing in the dark, thinking that this is what the inside of his lungs looked like. He fell back into the pillows like a disinterested heap of flesh and dragged on his cigarette.

Then it was over. A quiet returned to the river and the groups of visitors on the riverbanks. It looked as though some were clapping, but Rika couldn't be sure, the smudge of smoke making limbs intangible. Others bellowed out drunken words, their drinks drowning them in happiness. And some lifted themselves from the grass to take their leave. Rika arched over the banister, reaching out with her body. The river guests just drifted off, unaware of anything but their little lives.

'Why are they leaving already?' She spoke quietly to herself.

Yui was searching for something in her bag and Charlie looked into the distance dreamily. When Yui looked over, she got the impression that Rika wanted to shout something. Yui recognized her expression, of wanting something that was leaving, some intangible feeling that always felt just out of reach – or, perhaps, wasn't there at all. Then the drop into quiet, because there were no words that could undo the space. When Ryota returned, Yui held out the paper fireworks she was looking for.

'Here, I made these for us.' Everyone opened their hands and Yui lowered homemade *senko hanabi* (sparklers) into them, careful not to break them. 'I thought we could light them together, so we don't forget.'

'They're gorgeous.' Charlie examined the papery tube of powders.

'These are difficult to make, Yui. I'm impressed.'

‘Let’s see if they work first.’

They lined up on the balcony, in their *yukata*, Charlie’s borrowed from Ryota, and huddled close together. The groups left on the riverbank were drinkers, cloud-watchers, and the lonely, all looking for something in their pass-times, thinking quietly to themselves, as everyone does, that their feelings and failures were just a little more urgent, a little more gorgeous than the rest of the city’s.

‘Are you ready?’

They all dangled their *senko* over a flame and the ends caught. The flame burnt up the twisted end of the paper just to where the powders were then transformed into a droplet of an ember. They waited.

‘Hmm, guess I failed.’

The glow of the drops of charcoal and metallic chemicals faded then reignited. From the drop, microstructures of light branched out and crackled like aluminium. They all lifted what looked like synapses of light to their faces, showing each other the singular lustre of the things they held, each burning in a way that could never be repeated, trying not to miss a second of it until all the chemicals burnt away and all that remained was ashen paper.

Rika raised the remnants to her lips, closed her eyes and blew the ash out across the riverbank. The others imitated her.

‘Do you think they’re happy?’ Rika asked, watching the particles of ash fall away.

‘Who?’

‘Everyone that’s gone. Do you think they saw the fireworks?’

Chapter 7 – Dunes

The idea of a studio where Charlie could paint was a romance he loved to entertain, a pipedream that sounded the airs of artistry in his lungs like call to madness. A studio somewhere in a glass tower or in a loft of an apartment looking out over the green-blue bands of riverside trees, branching out into the surface of the city. He could never afford it, could barely afford the block of a Leoplace apartment he was in now.

Charlie's apartment reminded him of a dressed-up freight container; a box in which ironically, he could barely move. A futon on the floor next to a table that folded out of a cut-out in the wall and what was deceptively called a media unit (which was nothing more than a bedside table) and a laptop that constantly streamed British game shows or music all day, was all he owned. That and the easel, paints, canvases, and now dry paintbrushes in the corner opposite his futon.

Coming home felt like a falling into a hole, and he became overly conscious of his breathing when he lay up there on the fifth floor next to the holes of his neighbours.

If you remained in the room for a day, the world outside lost its tangibility, its density, and dissolved the same way a dream does when you wake up and you're not sure if you're awake.

Painting here became a burden for Charlie. He hated having to eat next to his canvas. It would not do to eat where he tried to create, to sleep so close to the canvas that always looked like a failure when he woke, to unfold tax documents next to his easel. Fried onions, toilet bleach, the weeks trash, and laundry detergent mixed together in a nauseating fume of daily living and made the room feel as unartistic as it could. Space was

reserved for the rich, or the lucky, which was sometimes the same thing, and Charlie was neither.

How could Charlie paint here? How could anyone disagree with his abandonment of the brushes in the corner? There was so little time with all the productions he was assigned too. The hours were unkind, often more than a day and a half and by the time he returned, he was empty of ideas and the canvas looked ugly. There was so much in the way, and he was so tired.

Painting was all he was good at; it was the only thing that lulled the humdrum gnawing thoughts in his head. What he couldn't articulate he resolved in the images he made and, though often failing, a percentage of the paintings managed to be something. For as long as he could remember, all he wanted was a studio with other painters where they could exchange ideas in the plump, fat light of the day. Where they could point with paint-covered fingers at the other's work and ask, and listen, and learn. He wanted nothing more than the intimacy of artists. But all he found was the likeable indifference of Ryota, who tried what he could to minimize himself in the world and find his art in the liminal.

Charlie could see the muscles in Ryota's back rotating as he connected the white light at the feet of an actress dressed as the *Kuchisake-Onna* spirit. Or some version of it that wore a ghostly white dress that made her skin look milky and translucent. The actress was holding medical scissors behind her back and was wearing a surgical mask to cover where there would be a cut from her mouth to each ear.

'Even with the grotesque make-up, this actress is somehow still pretty.' Ryota commented when he returned to Charlie's side and the final checks were called before filming.

‘If you told her that, she’d kill you.’

‘Only if she asked and you answered her question.’

This was the closest thing to his studio that he found; the sedative fuelled madness of set gaffers, actors and actresses, and the cocaine exclamations of production managers, racing around to create some version of a world that was more moving than their own – days and nights doused in exhaustion and the blurred choreography of acting from them all. Unlike the static colours of a painting, colours moved here quickly, and things had the feeling of slipping away.

‘If I were her, I’d leave the makeup on for Halloween.’ Ryota looked at the time. ‘We still need to get costumes.’

‘Let’s just go like this and call ourselves the disenchanteds.’

‘Hilarious. Rika would kill us faster than her.’ Ryota nodded in the direction of the actress-demon.

‘Why do I feel like we are always dressing up?’

‘The set demands it.’

Charlie took stock of the set, of the half-strangers around him who he'd spent hours with crawling through worm infested wood structures for a horror series, who he'd shared allergy medication with on the farms, or dressed the wounds of with salt-water in his eyes as another wave crashed over the breakwater onto their gangway and plastic covered cameras. This is what he adored about the film work. It allowed him to briefly look into the thousand lives he wanted to live through the lens of the cameras he carried and rigged, touching the periphery of all the things he couldn't be.

But, despite the romance of it all, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was avoiding his own life, that he was hiding from the thing he wanted most because he was afraid. This made him feel transparent and common,

the two things he hated most.

When he was asked to paint some classical figures for the production, something like excitement rushed through him. The head of the art department used words like haunting, creepy, disturbing; aesthetics Charlie only ever experimented with. The assignment renewed his ambition. What time wasn't used rigging, he painted. Everything that wasn't painting lost its relevance, and for a couple weeks before Halloween, Charlie's clothes always had paint on them. He looked at the world through paint fume glossed eyes again.

When Yui was over, he showed her some of the paintings he liked and asked her a handful of questions and noted down her serious, adoring comments on what he created. They would hold each other and fall asleep to the smell of drying acrylics.

A number of days before shooting began, Charlie returned to set with 11 paintings he admired. Aloofness and a cold detachment were his defence. He was quietly nervous. He wanted them to be adored, he wanted everyone to see. He guarded himself by remaining quiet for most of the day, until he showed the head of art his work. Ryota was with him, to translate if needed.

'Drop your shoulders.' He advised.

Charlie tried.

The head of art approached, rushed and distracted. Charlie lifted the plastic covering the collection of paintings and separated them so she could see them all. The head of art, a callous smoker of a woman, thumbed her bottom lip as she examined Charlie's paintings. Charlie tried to swallow the dryness in his mouth.

'These three will do.' The end of her cigarette pointed to the three

she wanted. *'The rest are too overwrought, too dreamlike. This is a horror. We needed more substance and corporeality. We will have to make do with these. Good, Charlie. Leave them here.'* She lifted the cigarette to her mouth and walked away.

Ryota translated the more advanced words.

Charlie nodded, unable to look at Ryota. Voices floated around the cavernous set. Tools were turned on and off.

'Charlie.'

'It's okay. Nothing serious.' He smiled and removed the unwanted paintings. And, again, Ryota cursed his inability to know what to say to cure the aches of those he cared about. Charlie tried to disguise the disappointment, but failed, being too transparent and common.

When wrap was called, the crew let out a howl in honour of the horror they filmed and it being Halloween. Charlie and Ryota started to derig what they rigged earlier, and the set was undone part by part as the crew drank and were undone just the same.

'Excuse me.' Charlie turned to see where the voice came from. The actress rolled back and forth nervously on the balls of her feet. She was still in costume with the makeup of the cut across her face. Charlie stood and dusted the set off his hands against his legs.

'Yes. Yes?'

'Are you the painter?'

'Excuse me?'

'Those paintings. Are they yours?' The actress pointed across to the unwanted paintings at the end of the studio set. Charlie tried to look, but the cuts in her cheeks looked too real to look away from. It was alarming, weirdly charming with her shyness.

‘Yes, those are mine. Sorry, I will move them.’

‘The painting at the back. There is a girl in a field with her arms out.’

The painting was of a body kneeling in a forest, with her arms down her thighs and fingers rooting into the earth as though electricity locked her nerves and the sinews in her arms. Her vampiric profile was peaceful, forgiving, looking down at her fingers with what looked like white particles in her eyes, constellations. The arresting violence in the arms and the peace in her face was a disturbing contrast and a terrible anguish gripped Charlie when he looked at it, unsure if it was a dead body, or something else.

‘Are you selling it?’

Charlie hesitated, not knowing what to say. He became aware of the dust on his hands.

‘Yes, okay.’

‘Okay. Please continue. Find me when you can and you can tell me what you want for it.’

‘Yes, okay.’

The actress bowed and smiled, the cuts deepening in her cheeks. She walked off, careful not to cut her feet on anything.

‘I really love it. What is the painting called?’

Charlie turned and got up from his knees again.

‘Ayaka.’

-

Charlie and Ryota left having just enough time after the derig to have a beer with the already half-intoxicated crew. Charlie sold the painting, and the actress thanked him formally. The other paintings remained in the studio. The duo left the studio in search of costumes, but they were late and were unsure of their chances of success. Halloween in Tokyo was infamous for drawing out the anarchic dispositions of the curious and the city was already awash with riotous thoughts. Charlie and Ryota moved through thousands of dressed up ghouls, ghosts, devils, demons, *yokai*, perfectly crafted imitations of characters from anime's or films or series, and with them the hundred other Halloween costumes that were more undressed versions of the real things.

The dead world, the dying things in the nooks of Tokyo entered all its neon for a night and purgatory overwrote the city. The liminal, and weird, and wanting wraiths drifted in and out of *izakayas* and *combinis* in search of amnesia. Without costumes, Charlie and Ryota entered and exited crowds of these nameless things, exchanging looks here and there with wanting bodies and the sedated, aroused expressions of those bored of their dull worlds, drooling at chaos.

‘Where are they?’ Charlie tried to shout over the celebrations.

Ryota sent a text. A group of inflatable ducks bounced by, passing a bottle of whiskey between them.

Come find us. Hee-hoo.

‘Is Rika mad? How are we going to find them in all this?’

‘They’re in there.’ Ryota pointed to the *Don Quixote* on the other side of the crossing

‘Oh, I get it. But it won’t be any easier finding them in the *Donki*.’
But Ryota already started into the crowd.

The ocean of bodies heaved and joked and laughed and howled as the two of them entered into it, like a copse of exposed limbs and pink flesh full of blood.

A group of colourful dresses full of frills and lace pleating were dancing in an opening. Ryota ignored them, but Charlie was absorbed in the contradictions of their dresses; Victorian, perverted, maid outfits dipped in pastel colours, they performed their mawkish dance almost robotically, their eyes giving them away, looking up to see who was looking, who was wanting. Men circled them and were looking on, dreaming of illicit things.

Nurses, the undead, science fiction models, vampires and hunters, whatever drew blood from something; femboys and succubi, teachers, students, Pokémon, pyjamas and soft, exposed bodies. It was overwhelming. The eyes begged to look, but there was too much, alcohol fumes touching whatever wasn’t covered. The city oozed body heat and desires.

They pushed themselves through more bodies to the scaffolding holding up speakers in the middle of the crossing. Charlie lost his footing and caught the metal appendage of the scaffolding and got a handful of the fake spiderweb hanging off it.

‘Are you okay?’ Ryota turned and was doing what he could to overpower all the other voices.

‘Yeah. I have never seen anything like this. I am not sure if I regret not experiencing a Shibuya Halloween earlier or if I am relieved.’

The two of them looked over the surface of bodies. Charlie tried to

shake the spiderweb off his fingers.

‘Look.’

What looked like a little girl in a school uniform was showing a permit to a police officer. The fingers of her other hand were looped with ropes and on the ends of these ropes were 2 nude bodies, a man and a woman, the ropes loosely tied around their throats. Save for the white rabbit masks and the rope, there was nothing else on their bodies. They turned their masks about, looking into the cameras as strangers photographed them, nothing about them betraying embarrassment.

When the officer, confused and fatigued, nodded her acceptance, the little girl in the uniform bowed politely and removed a bottle of hand sanitizer from her backpack. Choosing someone randomly out of all the costumes, she approached them, bowed, her short hair falling forward then back to cover her ears and sprayed the sanitizer into the stranger’s hands. The *yokai* rubbed its hands together, hesitated for a second then touched the tied nudes, pressing its hand onto the collarbones of the naked bodies. It bowed and withdrew into the crowd, looking at the photographs taken of it touching the bodies, laughing up into the light washed sky.

The next spirit was not as nervous and after the alcohol burnt its fingers, it curled its fingers over the woman’s breast and around the man’s dick, slowly and deliberately. Blood rushed through both the bodies and the man became half erect, the woman’s breath fragmented. The spirit released and bowed, withdrawing into the crowd for the next spirit to touch the trembling bodies of strangers.

‘Would you?’

They watched as they navigated the crowd. Charlie followed thinking of the alcohol prints on those bodies, the tingle of nerves as they

are touched.

10 minutes passed before they reached the other end of the crossing and the entrance of the *Don Quixote*. Just outside, a group of lupine, wolf masked youths tried to douse each other in alcohol and set each other alight. When one of the wolves caught light, the others laughed as he tried to extinguish the flame on the tar.

The *Don Quixote* was just as crowded as the crossing. The walls of Shibuya were not enough to hold back the currents of spirits and the storefronts circling the crossing accepted what patronage they could, like banks of a mad lake. The narrow and endless aisles of the *Don Quixote* goods reaching to the back of the building and up for seven floors were blocked by all sorts of creatures and characters and ghosts filling paper bags with the Halloween themed chocolates and treats on discount.

Ryota texted Rika and waited for the reply in the unbearable white light of the entrance. But there was no reply. They looked for openings in the store and made their way through the aisles, through a labyrinth of sales and knockoffs looking for Rika and Yui in the fake pretty of masks, makeup and madness.

They searched for minutes, finding their way through the *Don Quixote* to the second floor, then the third. To no success. It was hard to recognize anyone in costume and no texts came. When they turned corners, they examined the eyes of those they passed, through holes in masks or the smoky colours of eyeshadow. All eyes met theirs with confusion as if these normal, uncostumed things were lost.

Returning to the stairs, they split. Ryota took the fourth floor (clothing and accessories) and Charlie the fifth (miscellaneous). When Charlie arrived on the fifth floor, he quickly learnt the meaning of

miscellaneous things. They were things unneeded but wanted. There were what looked like hundreds of *Gatcha Gatcha* machines full of plastic capsules containing various miniature objects; confused kittens, characters from shows, miniature buildings, angry mushrooms, frogs with bows and arrows – whatever odd thing you could think of, there was a capsulized version of it here.

Charlie waited in the mass of customers moving from machine to machine, looking at what little thing they could carry home. A group of girls dressed in Neon Genesis costumes opened capsules with figures wearing identical armours to theirs and it was as if they copied and printed miniatures of themselves. Charlie looked to see if he could find something for Ryota, or Rika, or Yui. Then caught himself looking for capsules with melancholic foreigners somewhere in the mass of plastic.

A touch on the arm took his attention off the machines. A figure dressed in a loose black *jinbei* (a short *yukata*) over a black body suit with a white mask of an anguished woman with horns looked at Charlie. The mask was broken on the side, and Charlie could make out a delicate, angular jawline. The figure raised its black arms and opened its fingers over Charlies, dropping a capsule in his hand.

‘Yui?’

Charlie squeezed the sides of the capsules and opened it. A miniature boat, a ship, schooner perhaps, fell into his hand. Despite its size it looked perfectly accurate, as if you could sail it, were it big enough. Charlie turned the ship in his hands, looking at the paint used for the wood and the sails, how the textures were achieved.

‘Is this for me?’

The figure was gone, and Charlie scanned the host of machines to

find the mask and its horns. After a couple seconds, Charlie saw the mask looking back at it, turning a corner. He followed. Moving through the other ghosts and ghouls and lavishly dressed, the figure entered a curtained off area. The white banners demarcating the other area carried no symbols. Charlie passed through the banners.

The lights and images caught Charlie off guard when he entered. There were rows and rows of nude Japanese woman on boxes, sex toys of unimaginable shapes and sizes, and egg-shaped lube containers below other kinky objects for submission or restraint. When Charlie's thoughts adjusted he noted that the boxes with nude woman on them were labelled *onaholes*, realistic, plastic casts of the models on the boxes that men could fuck; choose a model and buy a part of her you could keep and drown in oils.

At the end of the narrow space, muted laughter came from two figures; the figure in black and an inversion of itself, a figure dressed in white with a black mask, unbroken, of a blithe woman with twisting horns.

'Little weird to bring me in here isn't it?' Charlie looked unamused but could not hide his embarrassment.

The figure in white approached Charlie and lifted a mask over his face. It just covered his mouth and was a vicious collection of *oni* teeth, pronounced cheeks, and a mad mouth-open grin. It looked like something from a *samurai* film. The figure fastened it, then ran its white cloth fingers over his eyes to close them.

'*What is this for?*' He held out the miniature ship and something closed his hands around it. When he opened his eyes, they were gone again. Pornography lit up on the screens in the alcove of sex goods above the film selection and Charlie left to find them.

The figures made what progress they could through all the costumes opening capsules of little things, finding the gaps in ghoulish limbs and painted skin. They were heading to the stairs. The figure in black with the white horned mask looked back, then ascended. Its unlike form descended to the fourth. Charlie followed the dark figure.

They climbed to the sixth floor (electronics and household goods) and then the seventh (travel goods, souvenirs) but the figure continued up, Charlie unsure if they could continue climbing, following the black trail of its clothing. A door with a no entry sign on it closed just above the next flight. Charlie stopped and looked back, waiting for something. The door was a cold metal. He opened it and followed.

The rooftop was flat, the grey of the cement dark and unwelcoming. The ends of the building were marked by rivers of light from the Halloween chaos, waves of colours lapping over each other as the spirits in the light lost their tangibility, their definiteness, diffusing into the neon drunk drip of release. The black figure was at the end of the roof, looking down into the wash of the colour, its horns reaching into the black of the sky.

'How did you know it was me?'

'You looked back.' The *oni* mask moved like a dislocated jaw. Charlie walked to the end of the roof next to her. The mad exhibition raged on below. The lights blushed then throbbed like it too wanted to be touched.

'Tomorrow, everything down there will be a passage of rain and umbrellas. Everyone will go back to being strangers. Isn't that odd?'

'We are no different.'

'Who are you? We've met before, haven't we?' Charlie couldn't tell if

Yui was being coy or dead serious. The mask was like a second jaw, a prosthetic from some other face.

'You were in the aquarium, weren't you? The harbour water? You were in Dublin. In the pubs? Julia's fingers. You were there. I am sure of it. The Hakone onsen. The bowstring and the thousand translations. You were there in the gallery, the house with all my mother's boxed things. All the books I read. My bed. Our bed. You were there.'

'Are you okay?'

'You were there, weren't you?'

'Yes.' His answer disguised an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, an unmoored vacancy that washed over her presence and diffused into it.

'But you're leaving.'

Then an acute ache flooded Charlie. That ache. The ache that was always with him. Always with her. They looked into the watery light ebbing at the ends of the roof.

'What is this for?' Charlie withdrew the miniature boat from his pocket. Looking at it, he wanted to drop it into the light, or take it apart in his hands.

'To remember me by.'

The Shinjuku debauchery paused, as if muted for a second. Then the faint voices of madness started again.

'Can I tell you something?'

'Of course.' Charlie was still looking at the miniature boat, but looked up when she started speaking.

'I was so lonely. I got so lonely I thought that if I met someone who stole, I would hide them as they did. If I met someone who ate people, I would carve out parts of myself for them. If I met someone who wanted to

die, I would die with them. But I never met anyone who wanted anything, who really wanted something. We are told what to want and lose ourselves in the listening.

‘I don’t know if you are listening, if you are being what you are told to be. But there was always something different about you. Like a dream drunk sailor. You left for the waves, for here, for all this. And you are leaving again. I don’t want you to leave. But how could I love you if you stayed? How could I love you if you were anything other than what you are.’

Water dispelled out of the holes in Yui’s white mask, down its plastic cheeks. *‘How will the ordinary be beautiful without you?’*

‘I don’t want to Yui, but my visa is ending and the studio refuses to help.’ Charlie looked down at the miniature ship. Then at their reflections in the glass across from them. The ends of them and the start of the darkness were hard to tell apart. Everything in him went dry, like he had ate powder and fury.

‘Come with me?’

‘I want to, but I have left so many parts of myself in other places, in other people. I feel so thin. And I am afraid. What if the desert is too big for me?’

A choir of debauchery issued up from the costumes below. Charlie could feel the wind but couldn’t hear it.

‘Rika and Ryota are the only family I have left. I can’t lose them again. Maybe this is where I need to be. What I am.’ Yui looked down into the costumed crowd. *‘An added umbrella in the passage of rain. Will you come back to me when you can?’*

Charlie looked down and thought for a second.

‘You were there. In Lüderitz, weren’t you? In the dusty cathedral. The metal faces of Johannesburg. You were there. In the loneliness of the trains, the unreplaced parts of the castle, the sets and the dreams. In the paintings. All the paintings. In the Hakone *onsen*.’ Yui’s mask was cold on his fingertips. With all the gentleness in him, he lifted it off and removed his own. ‘The fireworks. You were there. You were always there.’

-

Narita airport looked the same as any other airport, inflated with that feeling of placelessness and waiting. It was emptier than Charlie thought it would be, perhaps on the account of the late flight. All the restaurants were closed, and the building felt abandoned, the travellers still there, lost, as if they already missed their flight years ago and couldn’t find their way to the exits and back into the real world.

Yui and Charlie found a convenience store hidden among the restaurants upstairs. They thought they could eat something together at one of the restaurants but were left to buy what plastic boxed meals the convenience store had left when they found all the restaurants had closed. The options were few and Charlie just stared at them all, his ticket in his hands as if he were reading it or about to lower it on an altar.

‘What do you feel like?’ Yui asked. But he couldn’t look at her. It was all too much. The anger, the frustration, the sadness, the loneliness. It was all too much. He just blinked at the cream and strawberry sandwich on the shelf. Waiting for it to make sense.

Yui took the ticket out of his bent hands.

‘It’s okay.’

She chose for him, and they paid. Convenience store jingles played

over the speakers, and happy voices sang about Ramen as the clerk counted the change and handed it to Yui, a faceless clerk, just a hand, really.

They found an isolated row of airport seats in front of a glass wall. Aircraft lights of various colours glowed through the dark glass, Charlie and Yui's reflection moving across the canvas of black and bulbs of light. They couldn't eat, but tried to persuade the other to eat, or they'd be worried. So, they bit into the tasteless food and swallowed as much of it as they could, their stomachs imploding with the emotions they were trying to hide for each other's sake.

But it wouldn't last. All that feeling raged violently, doubling in the empty, vacuous spaces of the airport.

'Will you come back?'

'I don't know. I'll try.' Charlie tried to take another bite and as he chewed, tears dripped down his cheeks onto his sandwich. Yui dropped her head onto his shoulder, also trying to chew, also starting to cry.

The security officer looked only at his screen, boredom drooping on his face. He dragged Charlie's documents over the counter, opened them, examined them, and then looking at Charlie, paused at his swollen eyes, every measure of resilience trying to stop the heaving in his chest. The officer's automatic procedure was slowed. Doing what needed to be done delicately, as if the documents were fragile, seemed to him a kindness. It was all the kindness he could offer. He asked the default questions, confirming Charlie's name and destination.

Looking at the end date of the residence card, 3 days from now, the officer tried his best to smile. He punctured the residence card and left a hole in it. He opened his passport again. Stamped the ink. Then stamped

the passport and gave it back to Charlie with the pieces of his residence card.

The officer bowed as deep as he could at his station, as if to say: *I am sorry, but you have to forget now.* When he looked back through the glass partition at Yui, all the cells in his body hurt and he trembled back into tears. She tried to smile, wanting him to remember her for that and not for the mess she was now. She waved and he left.

-

The local radio was blaring in the taxi. Inconsequential nonsense about heat waves and dim politicians. Charlie tried to block it out. Heat radiated off the window and seconds outside of the Lüderitz airport after 4 painful flights, dust already found its way back into whatever spaces they could find on his body. It was all a red-orange-yellow mass of desert. There was nothing but dust and the road to Lüderitz. Dunes arced and fell into the horizon.

‘Where are you coming from, then?’ The driver was a tree of a man, limbs like bark that filled up the front seat and rooted into the machinery of the vehicle. He was friendly, beaming a smile in the rear-view mirror.

‘Just a business trip.’ Charlie lied, looking out over the dead earth.

‘Ah yes, yes. There is money to make out there. And you’re here for holiday?’

‘No, I grew up here.’

‘Eh!’ The rear-view mirror was now an insufficient medium to size Charlie up, and the driver turned around, taking his eyes off the road for all of ten seconds. It would’ve made Charlie uneasy if there was anything out there, but he couldn’t drive into anything if he tried. ‘You’re a Lüderitz

boy?’ Charlie nodded solemnly.

They came to a stop at an intersection, the traffic light was red. The airport buildings looked more like a farm in the distance, with its one aircraft refuelling to return to Windhoek. Not that anyone could farm anything out here. Charlie could make out the silhouettes of the Kolmanskop ghost town in the waves of heat to their South. He hadn’t passed through the ghost town in years.

‘Would you mind stopping at Kolmanskop for a minute?’

‘So you are a Lüderitz boy. Yes, it’s okay, but not for too long please. There is money to be made. Fast stop.’

The tyres crunched over the rocks of the dirt road. Charlie didn’t know if it was continual use that made the road underneath the vehicle a road, or if these were paths the dunes somehow never reached, never devoured.

‘Real quick then, Lüderitz. Look quickly.’ The words so clearly had an ending. They were absolute, final. *Look quickly, before it changes, before I have to leave.* The driver waited at his vehicle, leaning on the sun-wrecked rusted metal of the door.

The dilapidated buildings of Kolmanskop waited for Charlie. They were few and each somewhat easy to remember, but the desert around it, in it, could easily have changed over the years. Charlie couldn’t tell. He looked at the angles of the sand against the broken, opened walls and worm-eaten wood of stoeps and doors, particles of light falling off rafters like the leftovers of dreams. He asked himself if he was home. If Lüderitz was any different from this ghost town.

The paint of the buildings had been gnawed away and only blotches of it were left, arbitrarily covering parts of the grey skeleton of a town. It

was nostalgic the way any ghost town was nostalgic. There was something about absence that didn't need translation. There were conversations, exchanges, hatred, ambition, failure, love and all the other things we reach for or run away from, all in these walls. And now they were gone. And Charlie was left in its ruins.

Everything was still. Nothing was ever this motionless. Charlie looked down what he imagined used to be the main street of the town and out into the desert passed it all, the dunes that looked as if it were a planet of ochre.

Look quickly, Lüderitz. The clouds are moving. The voice was so far away.

All his history was out there, recorded in the desert as memories that were as nebulous and changing as the dunes. Charlie tried to see it all, to hold it in front of him and make sense of it. But he couldn't. It was all just a monochrome mass.

The engine of the taxi coughed, and Charlie heard the tyres drive off.

He tested the wooden staircase to the front door and slowly lifted himself into the remnants of the Germanic colonial architecture. For some reason he thought that he'd find Yui sitting there, with her back against the wall, waiting for him, pushing her fingers into the sand. But there was nothing there, just sunlight falling through empty window frames over sand that looked like the surface of an ocean of cinders.

The walls kept something of their personality intact. Faded blues, vibrant oranges, and water greens from one room to the next as Charlie crouched to get through the sand flooded doorways.

Charlie eyed a clawfoot tub in the adjacent room, half protruding from the sand and mostly empty of it somehow. He kicked the sand off his

sneakers and lowered himself into the tub, lying in it. Paint flaked off the rim of the tub where he was holding, and he cut himself on the dry paint. He cursed and looked at the blood on his fingertip, his prints more visible as the liquid filled the whorls. He inserted the finger into his mouth pressing his tongue against what blood had pooled.

The television was blaring. Some talk show about anime voice actors and how versatile their voices were flickered out of the clunky CRT screen. Boxed faces in the corners of the screen reacted to what was happening in the show. Shouts of surprise or looks of approval hanging in the corners like stickers on a report card. They always exaggerated. Yui hated them for it and for how her grandmother always reacted with the same feelings, as if she needed telling how to feel about something.

Yui always looked for a reason to disagree, even if she didn't. She tried to block out their silly guffaws as she set the table for dinner. Mrs. Nishikawa was adding some edamame and salmon to the rice cooker. When she was done, she examined her granddaughter through the empty doorframe.

'Did you cut up a girl's shoes today at school?' The June rains were about to start. Everything was already wet and humid, the rain gathering to run down windows and sweat down everyone's spines.

They were given seeds to grow for their first semester and all the plants were lined up against the towering fence of the fields just across from Nakanoshima station. Some grew

and ivied up the wooden frames the students made for their plants, fitted with a place to leave a plastic bottle full of water they used to water the plants each morning. But Yui's wouldn't grow. She tried to adjust the seed in the soil, she tried giving it too much water, then no water at all, but the seed refused to sprout and each morning she poured water over a dead patch of earth waiting for something to happen. That morning, Miho said it would never grow because Yui didn't have a mother and girls without mother's can't grow anything. So Yui cut up her shoes.

'Did you, Little?'

Yui closed her eyes, thinking if she held still the question would disappear.

The bleeding refused to stop, so Charlie pressed his finger into the sand in the bathtub under him and held it there for a second, blood colouring the sand like it were paper. He watched the colour change, his back curled awkwardly. He drew his bleeding finger through the sand, leaving an impression, a wake of where he had been.

Everything was the colour of the moon. Mrs. Nishikawa was asleep, and a little Yui quietly made her way through the moondark of the passage and into the room across the way.

Towers of boxes with labels on them made the room look like a cardboard city. Yui fiddled through them all, looking at things in the boxes labelled with her mother's name - dresses, photographs, teddies, love letters and all those other flashes of memories.

She did the same for the objects in her grandfather's boxes but felt less attached to them, as if he were further away. She clutched a jumper of her mother's to her chest and sniffed it, hugging it like there was still someone inside it.

Thinking then that her mother could have done the same for her father, she retrieved the objects from her grandfather's boxes, jealous that they got to feel her mother's hands. She touched everything, rubbed her hands on hats, and books, and paintings supplies and jumpers, trying to transfer her mother's touch onto her hands. And when she felt she was done, she touched her cheeks and tried to feel the warmth of her mother printed on her hands.

All the stories he had heard a hundred times played out in his head. They all had that dreamlike reality of a memory, like they were his. They were so familiar, half recognizable like memories are, half his and half someone else's – the ghost town in his head.

Charlie took his leave of the ghost town and waited at its entrance. He looked back and a wind howled through it, kicking up sand and decaying bits of houses, erasing that he had been there at all.

The land cruiser came to a stop just outside the ghost town. It moved as it always moved, as if the earth were no burden to it, crawling through the inhospitality of Namibia the way Charlie remembered when he was a boy. The drive, like the driver, was rough, but indomitable. The driver's door closed, and a block of a man waved from behind the vehicle's idling frame, lifting his foot onto the black bull bar. Charlie was waiting near one of the buildings. He found his suitcase abandoned where the taxi's tyre

marks were.

‘Hey, old man.’

‘Welcome back.’ He embraced Charlie with his log arms.

They got in and then drove off, away from Kolmanskop towards Lüderitz, Dean Martin on the radio, almost inaudible in the drone of the vehicle’s engine. He looked at his father’s hands. They were swollen with labour, with the signs of hard work and a resilience that cannot be taught. His father was the only one of his family who stayed in Lüderitz, tied to something that wasn’t there anymore.

‘How are you feeling?’ He looked as though he were made of wire, a lot of it. And though there was exhaustion chiselled onto his forehead and next to his eyes, he was always smiling, like the best things were still to come.

‘Tired.’ Charlie turned his eyes away from the ochre landscape and looked at his father. ‘Love the new hair.’ He rubbed his hand over his father’s shaved head.

‘Someone has to be the good looking one out of us.’

‘Let me know when you find them.’

Recognition set in. All at once, he never left. All of it was someone else’s memory. There were only the turning tyres, the relentless heat, the scars on his father’s hands. The desert recognised him. It was waiting for him to return, to disappear into the broken buildings and be forgotten. To lose his colour and have every surface of him covered in dreamlike, dust memories. Tokyo was so far away. Rika and Ryota were so far away. And Yui. All that was left in him, was an ache that would never leave.

‘So,’ his father rubbed his bulbous nose with the back of his hand.

‘How was it?’