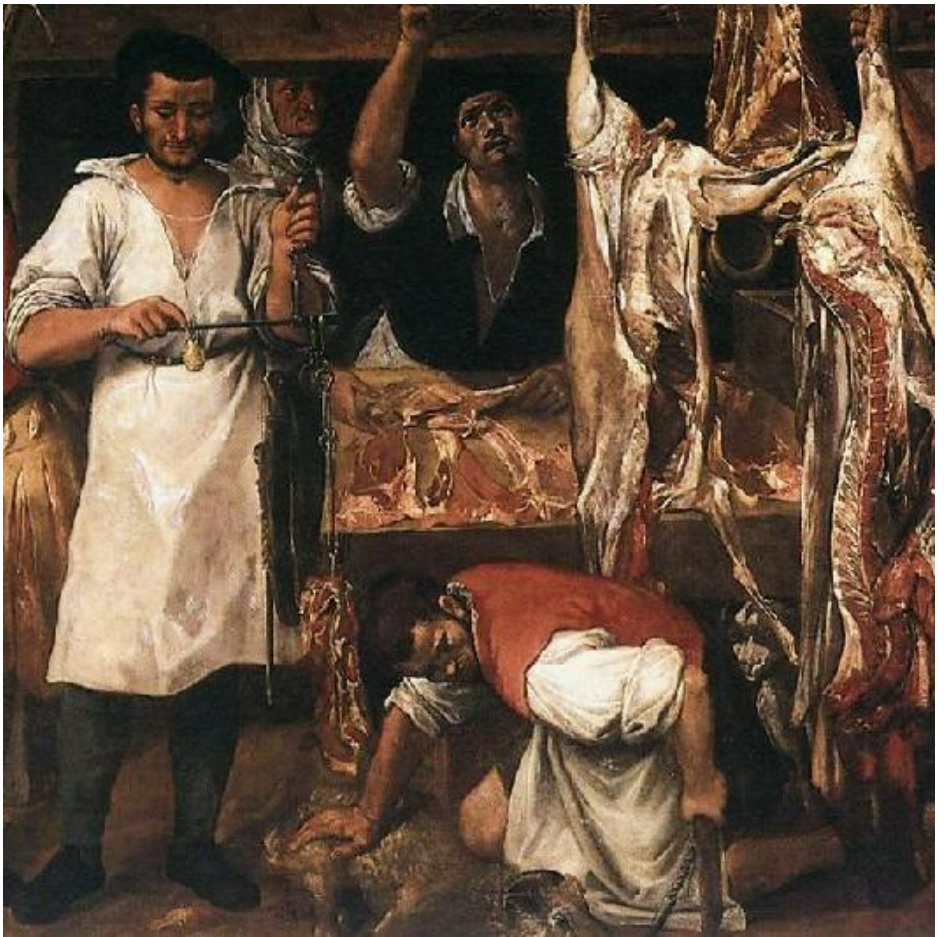


# CONVERSATIONS OVER SANGUINACCIO DOLCE



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**Content warning:** this book contains mentions of abuse, body horror, allusions to suicide, homophobia, and in-depth discussions of grief.

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**I**

**THE  
BOILING**

**On violence, passion, and obsession.**

## **Cruel Hands of Devotion**

I love you. I love you as if you were my own flesh and blood. I love you until I no longer have the breath to say it. I love you until the fireflies die out and you're holding my breath in your hands and the ground is quicksand and we're sinking and it's helpless and you don't reach for me and all I can think is that I love you. And it's why I understand when you pummel your fists into me.

I understand when your hot lips meet mine again and the sting of the bruise is dulled out by the feeling of a hungry body

And I love you until I'm on my back and teary-eyed and you're on top and my skin is burning and you're dousing me in gasoline and lighting the match

My shirt comes off faster than I can register and you devote yourself to me, my mouth opens up slower than it should and you devour me

I'm half-eaten on the bed and you pull away and i arch and I whine and I realize I'm asking to be consumed

What made you? What cruel hands  
twisted you in knots? Why am I not  
deserving of your cruelty? Why am I  
almost-loved? Almost-yours? *Almost-  
eaten?*

The claws come back back with a  
vengeance and dig into my hip bones  
The pain is bearable until it isn't and  
even then your little marks of love are all  
over me and I let you plant reminders of  
your veneration until every inch of my  
skin is an altar

Somehow I still end up atoning and you  
cup my face and tell me you forgive me  
and I'm once again blessed

I plan the wedding and you plan the  
funeral and we live in an ever-continuous  
whirlpool of thrown punches and venom,  
adorned with candles for taste, painted  
over and obscured

But my skin knows

## Nails

*Come, my sweet little encumbrance, let's rest your head,* I said

You dragged someone through the mud again today and all I could do was cross my legs and watch

Shut your eyes. There, there, let the anger out, let it seep from your pores and soak into the mattress

*I should've fucking killed him,* I heard for the hundredth time, gentle fingers

dabbing away at a cut across your forehead. I can't believe he said that.

I could. In fact, I believed more than anyone else. You dig your nails into everything you meet and refuse to let go, for love or hatred. I have five distinct holes on both of my shoulders, you can simply slot them in.

You dragged those same nails down my back, between my thighs, across my chest. I'd become accustomed to their little love language, leaving red marks in their path



I told you, *violence is not always intimate, sometimes you're just destructive*, I said, *I have bite marks in places you've never touched*, I said, *you can't hide behind aggression. You can't throw your fists at everything you love.* When I said, *hold on*, I didn't mean, *sink your teeth into me.* when I said *pull me closer* I didn't mean my hair. Let go. Let go. *Let go.*

Everything with you was an impulse. The itch to drive someone's head through a wall was made with the same speed as your choice to love me, to hold me to your chest and let me drift asleep to the rhythm of your breath, scratchy with the hours of screaming

*Stop loving me on a whim*, I'd beg of you, let your feelings not be a split decision. I'm in it for the long run.

You'd laugh.

I'd curl my hands into your hair, threatening tug teasing at your locks. *Look at me*, I'd ask, and we'd meet eyes, and you would smile, and I would grin, and I'd be nourished, and I'd feel loved, and it'd be soft, and gentle, and peaceful,

and we could be frozen in that moment  
like gas in a long-forgotten iceberg and  
never be rediscovered, and I'd be content,  
and you'd roll your eyes at me, and I'd  
tell you I'd die for you. And you say you  
would die for me too.

*You know I care about you*, I'd be  
reminded, and I'd nod. This is how it will  
always be.

Love is a bullet in the gun I carry out of  
fear. The gun isn't your fault but then  
again, neither is the love.

Life was different before the cataclysm, I  
remember how you used to stand in fields  
of flowers with your arms outstretched as  
if in prayer, absorbing your surroundings  
Now everything you kiss tastes like bile.  
Now everything you touch burns under  
your fingertips. Now if I'm ever eager  
enough to hope your rage will find peace  
I'll know I'm truly jaded.

Every time I ask myself: am I putting my  
head on your chest or under the blade of a  
guillotine?

I hold my breath and wait to find out.

## Unfinished Midnight Venting

*They must be drunk*, I remember thinking  
There was something too soft, too tender,  
too smooth about the way they moved. A  
current that threatened to carry me away  
before I could say my piece.

I couldn't accept gentleness in their  
sobriety, nor sweetness in their clarity, I  
craved inebriation to justify their love.  
But once they drank, the alcohol tickling  
our throats, the sentiments spilled onto  
the table and I unhinged my jaw, trying to  
catch them in my mouth all at once  
I hadn't ever considered pain, but as I  
was reaching down their throat my head  
reminded me, *mind the teeth*

I needed more. I wanted more. I crushed  
praise in my hand like honeycomb,  
licking languid strips up my arm, letting  
it caramelize around my lips.

Forget it, no, write me a sonnet, I need to  
leave so compose me a symphony, tell  
me you hate me but never let go  
I felt the drinks too much and not at all.

I craved ravenously for the sweet glaze of  
a compliment, for the sting of a  
toothache, for the grasp of violent hands  
on my throat  
After all, being hurt was easier to  
understand than being worshipped. At  
least that way I felt like I deserved it.

## **I'm a Little Box of Tenderness. I Beg of You, Stitch Me Up.**

Look at this box. Look at the space inside. Look at my hands. Look at my face. Try to discern what I'm feeling. Fail. Ask me how I'm doing. Listen to the deafening silence. Look away. Look in the box again. It's a wound, it's a gash, it's a cut. It's a slice right through the cardboard, and I see red on the other side. Take the box into your hand. Sew up the gash. Call it a scar. Tell yourself it's fixed. Watch me break down in sobs. Watch me beg you to stitch the rest of me up. Watch me hand you another box. And another. And another. Look away again. Look at the cardboard of my skin. Look at the roughness of it. Take your box cutter and your needle in each hand. Debate tearing me apart for a kindergarten project. Put the needle down. Ask me how I'm doing. Listen to the pained sobs. Kiss the corners where my folds meet. Drop the box cutter on the ground. Put me together. Fix me, Heal me. Look at this little box of love. The tenderness of it.

Crack me open. Let me weep with  
praises. It's an obsession, it's a war cry,  
it's a sonnet. Watch the blood pool on the  
floor. Sew faster than you've ever sewn.  
Curse the universe for my suffering. Stop  
the flow. Watch the box go quiet. Hold it  
close to your heart. Remember when it  
didn't need stitches. Reminisce. Note that  
your hands are covered in blood.  
Remember to wash them. Remember to  
hide the box cutter. Put the box on your  
nightstand. Kiss it good night. Promise  
you will sew up any new gashes  
tomorrow. Close your eyes. See my face  
behind them. Open them up. Check for  
the box. Exhale.

## Swimming Yak

Rain tastes like you tonight. Water soaks into my shoes and before they've dried I bring them into my house. The droplets left over are quickly wiped dry by a nearby towel but I lift it up to wash and I see blood.

I throw it away and rinse my mouth. I consider sawing off my tongue. The floor is shaking with the moisture and I'm sinking again and now it's raining upwards. And now my home is a butcher's shop in the middle of the night. There's an overgrown carcass in the middle of my room. The upwards rain is making it float and I see it in my bed and it blinks back and I decide to climb in beside it. Closer. Inside it.

Its skin feels like yours, just colder and less forgiving.

I'm drenched still, and I think I'm crying, but I can't quite tell because my face feels liquid.

Your animal, our carcass, shuffles and I become the beating heart within it. I'm pointing a gun in the mirror and fur begins to grow on my chest.

*What are you?* is all I can think to ask. I don't want to believe the monster is now me. I don't want to bear fangs or claws. I don't want tears to taste like familiarity.

*Aren't I deserving of tenderness too?*

The rainwater is pooling at my knees now and I see the carcass bloat. I see it as a matted mop of fur. My only choice is to use it as a float, to I hold on and I do, and the rainwater is blood again and the floor is long gone. My soul fights for a quick departure but I hold it by the collar and let it sink with me.

Until we're nothing but carcasses on the ocean floor. Until we're nothing but fossilizing torsos and closed eyes entrapped by abandonment. Until the fur begins to grow inside my mouth and my blood is rainwater.



## Victim Complex

Call this fate or call it free will, I've  
disemboweled them all for you. You're  
worthy of more,  
you're more than a God, and I'm more  
than a mortal now that I bow at your feet.  
You're angry with me, I can feel it, but I  
cut people off before you get close. What  
do they have  
that you don't think I can give you? Why  
am I not enough? Why do you need  
someone else?  
Punish me, I dare you. Chase me through  
the woods lest you forget that *you hunted  
me first.*  
You've caught me, now you're stuck with  
me, my darling. You knew what you were  
getting into,  
so let's play a game  
Be my valentine victim, sign my death  
warrant with a bite mark, try to cut my  
hand out of yours  
and realize our skin has fused together  
like melted wax. You'll need more than a  
knife to get rid of me.

You'll need more than acid, more than  
sandpaper, more than divine intervention  
to pry your desperate little fingers out of  
the confines of my throat. I intend to  
engulf you entirely so we  
can walk this planet as one, and my  
hands can be yours and I'll learn how to  
curl my tongue  
when you inhibit my face.  
Make a home out of me, set your bed in  
my stomach, I'll open my mouth so some  
light can seep through, speak in morse  
code to me through vibrations. We can  
stay like this forever. I never  
have to be hungry again, and they never  
have to see you again, and you'll never  
have to worry  
about losing me when my innards are  
your walls.

## **My Life as a Voluntary Effigy**

Kill me, you terrible thing.

You know I feel more at home when  
clasped between your calloused hands.

You know I bare my neck when you look  
like you will bite. I'll roll over onto my  
back before you even pounce.

Devour me, I dare you. I'm yours to  
disfigure, I'll fall to my knees, do as you  
wish with my skin. Mangle me, my love,  
burn me, etch a love letter onto my back  
with your claws.

This room can be a slaughterhouse if you  
want it to be. If I'm a hunk of meat, so be  
it.

You tell me I'm a welcome distraction.

*I'm a distraction the same way a house  
fire is, I say. You 're only focused on it  
because it's a disaster, you want to help  
but you 're under-qualified, you 're  
watching other people try and get  
scorched. I'm a distraction like a pothole  
in the road is a decoration. It's been there  
for as long as you remember and you  
can't imagine life without it, but every*

time you fry to process it you're hit with an overwhelming sense of ugliness. You're letting me burn and I fry to tell you I want you with my sputters. The licks of flame are hungry for you, they want to catch you in their clammy palms, you take a step back, I don't regret burning. The pile of my ashes becomes a monument, you leave it there as a reminder of what I once was. You realize you messed up. You regret letting me self-destruct but you know I asked for it. And I've never been happier than I am right now, with you standing over me and missing me, and wanting me, and wishing I was back. You were just following orders. This was all meant to be a game. One big, suffocating, game. I knew you couldn't make it without me, I just needed to prove it. What will you do with yourself now? What did your hands do before they held my heart? How did you speak before you learned my name? Who were you before me?

You're standing before the mirror,  
chanting *who am I now? Who am I now?*  
*What am I now?* You can't remember.

## The Boy

What's a boy got to do to get some tenderness around here? Where does one go to find men, declawed? I'm used to hands coming in like tectonic plates, melding flesh into ravines and peaks until it's unrecognizable, initials scrawled into my back with nails. They always love a pretty, quiet little thing. A man untouched, a blank canvas, a square of pale, rosy skin they can plant their marks on. *Stud*, they'll say, *hey boy, show me that youthful charm. Play that boyish melody again. Dance for us, dance, perform, bat your eyelashes, kneel, open your mouth, swallow, roll over.* I just want to know if I'm still shaped like a man, after all this. Do I feel like muscle in their hands? Do their mouths trail on skin and think of filth? How many skinned knees and palms raw do you go through before someone grabs your face and asks you to stay? I want to hear that I taste like rough hands hard at work, and though my flavor lingers on their lips they can't take it home to their wives.

I take everything home, though. The word *whore*, the ruffled hair, the tear-stricken cheeks, the bruises in the shapes of fingers. What's a toy gotta do to get some agency around here? I sit in the bath and I let myself unravel. I close my eyes, I press my hands against the marks, I decide that they are shaped like me. I will always look like a scrap ripped out of a tapestry. Unseemly, needy, raw. Shame nobody taught me to sew. What's a man gotta do to get some love around here?

## Dripping on the Floor

I put my hand on a mirror and it goes right through it. I think, *if I were to be asked to draw my face it'd be nothing more than some abstract shapes*

I closed my eyes a long time ago. I sealed them shut for my own good and now I'm wandering

amidst the blindness in search of something to hold onto

I long for something that does not yet exist, for something I don't deserve, for a feeling so fabricated I try to stash it away in the "fiction" section of my bookshelf, or better yet, throw it away entirely

One day I saw you, *saw you*, a vast chapel of things profound and incomprehensible, and I shut my eyes so tight I could feel the strain in my temples, and I felt blinding light through the cracks

until I buried my head in my hands

I was worried if I saw you once and fell in love and let the feeling permeate my body I wouldn't be able to unlearn it.



What happens when the blinding light leaves and this time the darkness is not self-imposed? How do I light a lover's candle if I've never carried matches?

I put my hand on a mirror and it gets stuck in it. I think, if I were to be asked to describe my feelings, it'd be nothing more than incomprehensible noise  
My eyes are wide open now and I've forgotten there were so many colors and textures and patterns

I forgot that candles burn out, I try to blow the light out but it doesn't budge and so I leave it on my desk as the wax begins to pool and be rendered useless. I go back into my bookshelf and search for the feeling I left so long ago  
I burn flames of love just to put them out and to close my eyes again. I put away my loneliness  
but I always come back to it, like it's what I've decided I am, it's my rotten organ in dire need of a transplant.

The light is inside me and I want to pull it out. The light is eating me whole and I'm pooling on the desk, rendered useless. The light is opening my eyes and blinding me again and now I'm wandering amidst the blindness with something to hold onto and it doesn't feel any different than when I was alone. Maybe it's because I've already pocketed the loneliness in the gap between my heart and my lungs. Maybe it's because the wax is dripping to the floor now and it's too hot for you to gather back up, maybe it's because I'm damaged goods, maybe it's because I've lived my life with closed eyes for so long *What's another five years of a life survived, not lived? What's a decade of wandering aimlessly if that's what I've done my entire life?* I put my hand on a mirror and I look like myself and not myself. I'm dripping on the floor now and I'm too hot for you to gather back up

Your scorched fingers sure do try, and  
when you pour me into a new jar and put  
a fresh wick in  
me I'm almost

## **Under the Bridge**

What we had, baby? It all water under the bridge. Under the bridge. Under the bridge. Under the bridge where the dead dogs lie. Under the bridge where you held my hand, where we smashed that bottle, where I lost my ring.

Under the bridge  
where the blood splatters bloom and the people whisper and the animals scatter.  
Below the grass where the fungi grows.  
Buried in dirt where the bones all sing.  
Drowning in the river and crushed by the pressure. Caked in algae and swallowing dirt.

Under the bridge where you sawed me in half, under the bridge where the puddles plead for mercy, where the supplicants choke and wither, where they learn that God's truth is no stranger to lies.

## Where Is It? Where Is it? Where Is It?

You won't tell me where your love is so I have to dig it out. Is it hiding in your chest? Is it in between your collarbones? Could I taste it if my teeth pierced the tenderness of your neck?

I'm searching and I'm searching, holding knives and guns and claws. Making the incision, digging in. You've hidden it from me. *Why have you hidden it from me?*

You rip apart faster than I wanted, and you're open and I'm looking into you and I'm in love with your flesh. And the flesh looks away.

But I'm hunting for something else. It's not under your skin, so I can only soldier on, already elbow deep in you and shifting things around in search for it. I know it's there. It has to be there or else I'm crazy, or worse, unloved.

I'm whispering to you, to it, *Love, you can come out now. Let me see you. Let me find you. Let me cradle you and keep you.*

My fingers dig into your stomach, Love  
sounds awfully like a squelch. I dig  
further, deeper, now  
everything is one red pulsing blob and if I  
squint my eyes hard enough you look like  
a big heart.

I've braided your tendons, your  
capillaries are my strings. I play a little  
melody to coax love out,  
I sing to it, I beg, I order. *Where are you?*  
*Where are you? Where are you?*

I'm squeezing, I'm tearing, I'm piling  
your innards on the side.

I see the beating mass. I clack my teeth, I  
lunge, I bite.

If I can't find your love then I will chew  
and spit what failed to make it. I'll  
swallow what's left  
of your feelings.

You forfeit my tenderness. You forfeit my  
intimacy.

Love calls out to me like it's coming from  
the back of my head. I turn around and  
around and  
around and it's not there. You're lifeless  
now and I quietly fold your skin back up.

And now love can't live  
because neither  
can you.

I wish I hadn't looked for it.

Complacency could've been so peaceful.

Now love has withered  
and dry-aged. You're oxidizing by the  
minute and Love still doesn't show.

## Ode to Cain by Lord Byron

You're not a God, not yet. Get dressed for your apotheosis. Learn the art of abandonment, remember you don't owe anyone, marvel at your self sufficiency  
The first step is to kill your love for all that's mortal, they're transient specks on the canvas of life, you paint in broad strokes and cover them up  
Next, imagine yourself as the menacing sun. You're a blazing Messiah, a creator, a king. Your entire life is a vast solar system, let your devotees worship, let them beg at your feet  
Next, you unlearn how to feed, and to hunger, your satiation comes from people's emotions. You'll forget what food tastes like, but you'll have so much power, holding the scalding, hot, wrath of God in your mouth. Let it sizzle on your tongue like boiling water.  
You don't need their love, you're not aching for it, you let your lithe fingers twist smiles on their lips.



You've abandoned worship, your church  
is a mirror, your name is a prayer that  
nobody speaks

You're floating on up now, you're closer  
to heaven, your life is a movie that you  
wrote and directed. And nobody watched  
it, and you say you don't care, and your  
armchair becomes your mighty throne.

*Nobody can hurt me from this high up,*  
you think. Everyone's face is a  
nondescript mass, coffee tastes bitter but  
mostly like water, you gargle soot  
and glass in your throat to see if it's  
different. You cannot quite tell but you've  
torn up your insides, you've made a blood  
sacrifice, you're your own temple  
You're immortal, you're free, *long live the  
king!* Your body will thrive while you let  
your mind wither.

Everyone you once loved will eventually  
pass, and you'll be watching their corpses  
go deep underground, and you'll realize  
that they don't remember your name, and  
their next of kin won't  
recall your face.

Enjoy your own company, you have a whole palace, but the halls won't stop echoing with your footsteps and weeps  
You're God now, it's time. It's clear when you shout and what comes back is thunder. Your voice isn't human, your body has faded, but you're stronger than them.

No one can hurt you because they don't know you exist.

You 're a deity, a danger. *Are you happy now? Are you happy?* You have no response.

Unleash your anger, let the world feel it, burn that small village in a blaze of flames. Consider the ashes atop screaming faces, let yourself turn away, consume the Earth's core, turn into a phoenix, marvel at what you've done, smile at your power, at the glow of your hands. When the screams die down and the rubble is dust, when you've left them all lonely just like you have been, you can comfortably sit in your brick-by-brick palace, and imagine what it's like to be a human being.

## Monument

*These people, these boys, these girls, you say, they hurt you because they love you.*

No, I retort, they hurt me because they they find themselves repulsive.

They hurt me because their parents don't love them. They hurt me because I'm a mirror they hold up to their faces and smash when they don't like what they see.

They hurt me because I represent everything they've spent years repressing  
The boy can't get out of the closet so he pulls you into his, and it's dark and covered in cobwebs and it smells like copper, and cheap whiskey, and years on a basketball team he wanted nothing to do with

You spend seven months climbing into the girl's window for her to introduce you as her friend at Chanukah

You take the person's hand in public and they pull away, they whisper a soft *no*, they keep their distance, they avert their gaze

And the vitriol and hatred are theirs to  
release and yours to hold,  
to absorb, to internalize. You're filthy,  
you're broken, they hate you, they're not  
like you. *I'm curious, I'm trying  
something new,  
this is a game,* they say  
They throw you on the ground and  
trample you with love, you're  
black and blue and you're not sure if it's  
hickeys or bruises and  
they hurt all the same  
You're a novel of prejudices, you're a  
testament to God's hatred,  
and you're a sinner. A dirty, rotten, no-  
good, sinner. And soon that  
becomes easier to believe than being  
loved ever was.  
Suddenly, bad is all you've ever been.  
Suddenly you're a bad  
apple waiting to spoil the bunch. God  
brings you up to his lips  
and spits you out, and leaves your core in  
the middle of the street.  
You spend your life atoning, your scabby  
knees meet the pavement again and

you're dragging yourself to another  
wretched  
soul that has become your religion. They  
crush the apple core  
under their foot. You try to salvage it and  
look like a fool, sat on  
the concrete with shaky hands trying to  
piece together a quickly  
degrading fruit  
Ripping and stuffing pages of the Bible  
into your mouth won't  
make you any more holy. Reading it  
won't save you either. Your  
castigation was written in the walls  
before you were born. You  
will die trying to find the right words to  
formulate a prayer.  
You will be buried face down, not even  
God will look you in the eye.  
I refuse to be a free trial any longer. I  
don't owe anybody my  
atonement nor my forgiveness. *If I'm  
doomed to spend my death  
in Hell I will not spend my life  
apologizing.*

If my only sin is my attraction, my  
tenderness, my desperate need  
to be wanted, then so be it. Let Judgment  
Day come along and  
understand that I don't live for hatred but  
for the feeling of his  
hands in mine.

I'm a menace, I am flawed, I'm a monster,  
a creature, something  
other, an "it", a self-sufficient crime, a  
symbiotic passenger and  
car crash. I am a monument to queers  
unchained.

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# II

# THE WHISKING

**On love, relationships, and  
conjunction.**

## A Beautiful Room Built on the Wrong Coordinates of Spacetime

I built you this room.

*There Is a time and place for everything,*  
you reminded me, *this just isn 't the right time*

I gave you a place. This could be our place, Jo, we could put the dresser there and this is where I'd store my secrets, you'd have to buy another lampshade but I left some space for your memories.

We'd never have to leave. *Stick around, will you?* You and I could move in and spend our days expanding it, adding colors upon colors until we've exhausted all the samples.

I heaved, hauling treasures and gifts from the life we lived a decade ago, littering the room, looking for anything that could anchor you, grasp you by the hand and look you in the eye, and maybe you'd see me in the reflection, and maybe you'd realize that I love you. Without you this room is a prison.

The chairs are sourced from your  
grandmother's home, we'd visited and she  
fed us apple pie. She called  
me a bright young man, I'm sure you'd  
beg to differ

The puppy in the comer was that one we  
found on the street - do you remember?

The walls, inches upon inches upon  
inches of photographs and recollections,  
memories and

sentimentalities, many of which I knew  
you wouldn't remember, and many of  
which I wish I didn't have  
to either

The objects stacked until there was a pile  
between us, and I could only see your  
face through the gaps  
between the souvenirs

*I don 't need any of this*, you would say,  
and I always reminded you that you  
deserved it. *I could be what  
you deserve, Jo.*

*I need space*, you said, and I obliged.  
I tore down my wall, discarded my  
books, buried my friends, and smashed  
my furniture, delirious and

needy and everything beyond. I left my  
side of the room completely empty. Now  
you can step in  
I've replaced my bed with your grand  
piano, I'll sleep standing just to hear you  
play.

*There you go, Jo, you have all the space  
you need, now will you stay?*

You didn't say a word. I watched you  
settle in our reading nook, book in hand  
and glasses askew on your  
face. How it was always meant to be.  
Day upon day, I'd sit in my corner of the  
room and you'd sit in yours, and we  
wouldn't speak but I'd  
watch as you licked your finger to turn  
the page. You stayed and that's all that  
mattered.

*I'm suffocating, you said one day,  
seemingly out of nowhere. I was taking  
you through a memory album  
hammered into the floor,  
I didn't understand.*

*Goodbye, I heard.*

The door of our room split into six even  
prison bars

I built this for you. I wrote that song for  
you. I kissed that girl for you. I fell apart  
for you. I put myself  
back together for you. For you. For you.  
*For you. For You.* The tongue behind my  
teeth is yours and it's  
fighting to get out of my mouth. I clasp  
my jaw and it settles.  
Fuck the room. Damn the memories.  
Wreck the ceiling. Throw away the  
chairs. Strangle the puppy. Tear  
the photographs. None of it matters  
anyway. None of it matters, Jo. We 'll  
find another room. In fact, we 'll  
build a mansion, a palace, a planet, a  
universe, a heaven. You can be God and  
I'll be your worshipper.  
I sat alone, in the remnants of a cozy  
home, surrounded by rubble and betrayal.  
You never even came to visit.

## Termites

I forgot him like the skin that healed the  
wound but kept the scar  
*You're not deserving of my time*, he said,  
and I held those words between my teeth  
as they dissolved on my tongue  
I lapped it up  
We'd spend quiet Wednesday afternoons  
shackled down to what was expected of  
us  
And frantic nights covering the tracks of  
things unexpected  
He lived beneath my porch, sometimes I  
still hear his voice in the creaks of the  
floorboards  
*You 're still here even though you're not*, I  
would say, and he'd scatter himself across  
my patio  
like ash  
I found myself tearing down the planks,  
calloused hands in search of the sound  
like searching for an embrace in the  
darkness  
I found termites.

And in a way, they meant he was still  
here, just changed, crawling about in a  
colony

Chewing on the remains of my home,  
swallowing the hardwood of my heart  
*Give it back*, I'd say, and he'd crawl  
faster, and he'd invade shamelessly, and  
he'd consume  
guiltlessly

One day I hammered the porch back  
together,

Then the sound came from my own  
throat

A quiet one at that, but a persistent  
whining, a soldier yearning to be at home  
A child separated from his mother, a bird  
in search of a nest that is long gone  
I forgot him like the cup glued together,  
still functional but forever askew

## Emily

*She's too kind*, I always told people, and  
I'd always be met by the same  
disapproving eyebrow,  
quirked up in a snarkiness most words  
couldn't achieve  
*Kindness needs to be in abundance*, I was  
reminded, *you could use some of that*,  
someone pointed out  
I watched it destroy her.  
Kindness made her bare, I could count  
the beats of the heart on her sleeve, I  
tasted the tears  
running down her face before she let out  
her first sob, she let me.  
She was so transparent they walked  
through her, and never cared to stop  
I watched her follow, though she  
dissipated before she ever reached them,  
leaving a trail of  
breadcrumbs for the next sadist to use her  
as a doormat  
You'd almost think she did it on purpose.  
That, in some way, she emptied her  
entrails onto the



operating table just so people could  
marvel and admire her bravery, though I  
knew there was  
nothing brave about being mishandled,  
nothing brave about the way she crawled  
back

Until, one day, she stopped  
The closing of a venus flytrap, the  
sinking of a sandcastle, the rotting of a  
body  
She'd ripped out her sleeve and damned  
it, holding the organ in her hand and  
cursing naivety and  
wide eyes  
The photo album buried, the evidence  
burned.

*I don't care anymore*, I'd suddenly hear,  
*he should've been sorry two months ago*  
The rose showing its thorns for the first  
time, petals falling left and right  
*I've changed*, she'd reiterate  
Venom never looked so horrid on anyone  
else. For a moment I'd glance at her and  
see fangs, or  
maybe they were horns? And the  
beautiful, blonde girl was no longer a girl  
at all - but something Other

The Other never hurt me, but I watched  
as it devoured one after another, years of  
pent up hunger  
egging it on  
*Isn't that enough? I finally broke, haven't  
you hurt enough?*  
The Other and I met eyes for the first  
time. It gleamed with something I didn't  
recognize.  
The last thing I remember is teeth.

## **When Selflessness Becomes Destructive**

*You can never afford to be attached, he sighed, you can never get close to anyone in case they actually make you feel something. You can never hold me too close lest I see your scars and ask about them. You can never kiss me too deep, you fear our lips will never detach. You're a hungry animal afraid that if it begins to eat, it'll never stop. You can't live your life hungry. You can't.*

My stomach rumbled as we met eyes  
He was crying, eyes puffy with tears and hair unkempt, knuckles white as they grasped onto my shirt. I'd just told him I was leaving. I always did.

*I don't want to be touched if it isn't your touch, he continued. I don't want to be loved if it isn't by you. Sometimes I wonder if you'd look for me if I got lost And maybe if I disappeared for long enough you'd realize you can't live without me.*

My chest shook with something unfamiliar but what came out was a rumbling laugh, a heavy coat of humor layered on top of everything I really wanted to say. It was easier this way. *Mateo, I'm going to hurt you, and I'm going to make you feel like it's your fault,* I looked down upon him and received worship. *One day, I'm going to snap, and you're going to wish you'd never met me. You're going to carry blisters on your heart for the rest of your life* He nodded, though I knew he didn't understand. M was never one for rational thinking, He was built out of glitter, he spent his life floating, covering every surface in my life shamelessly, he talked to everyone as if he'd known them for millennia. He kissed like he was afraid people would let go and hugged until the other person pulled away; he memorized every birthday, every anniversary, every first kiss, date, movie, dinner, every single hour of every single day was sentimental.

Mateo could see the devil and find a reason to fall for him. He fell in love time and time and time again until his chest beamed with affection for the entire planet, every tree, person, animal, piece of used tissue, sandwich, concrete block, ocean, grain of sand, he kissed it all gently. He loved it all gently.

Until he was sapped of his energy via his generosity, chest aching to love everyone except himself

It's why he stayed with me. I knew. I was difficult to love. I was a project. I was a point to be proven, a sinner redeemed, a geode cracked open to reveal a brilliant middle

But I knew he'd spent the last 6 months cracking into a piece of coal. That when he'd finally open me up I'd seep with soot and darkness and he'd have to throw me across the room and run

but by then it would be too late

So I took the hammer out of his hand and kissed his knuckles, and sent him on his way.

*Don't do this*, I heard again, and for a moment I almost listened. For a moment he was convinced it was possible to love me. For a moment, I believed him.

## **Bodies in a Dim Room**

A glass of wine had never felt so intimate. It was the movement of your fingers over mine when you passed the glass, and the way our eyes met as you poured, illuminated by the fire. It was the way your lips upturned when you saw the edges of my shirt revealing my collarbones, it was the way you settled beside me rather than across from me

Silence had never felt so intimate. Words spoken without movement, hands grazing over hands and letting them melt into one until contact became second nature and we were inseparable. You told me you loved me and this time, I believed it. This time, I said it back. Almost.

*I want to stay here forever*, I muttered, and I knew that you understood by the way your eyes darted to my face. They held the weight of something I could never process before.

My gaze reached forward to help you bear it and got swallowed whole by adoration.

I almost choked on  
the sickly sweetness of it, real arms  
reaching out and pulling you closer,  
impossibly closer, so close that when I  
heard the thump of your heartbeat in your  
ribcage my voice echoed in it

*I love you*, you said again and it was in  
time with my breathing, and you sank  
into me, and every hair on the nape of my  
neck stood up when we kissed. Two  
bodies in a dim room doing the only  
thing they knew how. Two souls in an  
endless space choosing each other over,  
and over, and over  
again.

A gaze had never felt so intimate. All you  
had to do was look and I knew you meant  
you can't

live without me. The crackling of the fire  
died down and I heard you humming our  
song under your breath

Gun to my head, I couldn't tell you the  
lyrics, but by the way you closed your  
eyes and smiled I knew it was an ode to  
me.



## **When the Heart is an Animal Shelter**

*Careful, careful, careful.* Don't hurt me. Your soul is an animal, I see bared teeth when we dance in the dark. I see focused eyes when I'm sprawled out on the couch. I see a vicious beast in the dark. I see focused eyes when I'm sprawled out on the couch. I see a vicious beast awaiting consummation in the lowest form. I hear the scattering of paws when I ask about your past.

And yet, I see a quiet tenderness clasped in your jaws. You don't let me hold it but I know it's there, that the little creature acts out because it's aching to be loved.

*Gentle, gentle, gentle.* Your soul is my little pet. You place it into my hands and I cradle it, nuzzling it up to my cheek. I lay your soul to rest and you exhale, and the animal you've grown to be is napping on the floor by my fireplace.

## **Hotdogs, Skittles, Whiskey, and Oranges**

I'm a lover, not a villain. Taste the sweetness of my youth. Don't be afraid, don't look around, I'm here to kiss your fears so hard they forget to be afraid. I'm here to hold your hand.

I love your pretty eyes, the way they flutter shut. Run away with me, be reckless. Waste your time, smash the hourglass of your life, don't bother to put it together as we fuse in the backseat of your car.

You're a lover, not a bully. Don't listen to what they say as you turn up the radio, drown out everything in our perimeter. Eat nothing but gas station garbage for days, proclaim your love with a packet of Skittles.

I quickly find out that your mouth doesn't wait. You never had patience for anything, so why start now? I'm undressed in moments, I'm naked in more ways than one.

I'm hovering over you, you give me that smile.

We're hundreds of miles away from the pull of our town, from the whispering voices, from the rumors. I'm starved for affection, tired of cowering in the streets in fear of being noticed. I hand my love to you in public now. I love you so loudly my throat is hoarse.

You're on the road, I feel like I'm dreaming. We're driving down an aisle, you're the groom, I'm the groom, and suddenly that's not a problem.

We settle in the middle of nowhere, your proposal is a hotel room key, our consummation is a sleepless night with a cheap bottle of whiskey. The warmth in my stomach burns with adoration.

I dream of you picking oranges, landing on the soil, rough hands hauling the basket as I pick you up in turn. I dream of you're my world and we've found our place, baby.

I wake up to a warm body next to mine.  
The air smells like gas station hotdogs,  
like Skittles, like whiskey,  
like oranges.  
like oranges, like oranges, and oranges,  
and oranges, and oranges.  
Like two souls finally free.

## The Consequences of Seeing God

Conversion was always frowned upon in my circles, it made me taste a certain flavor of bile that was akin to my mother's dismay, my father's despondency

And I when I met him, I told him all about the Lord and where he's headed as a non-believer, and why I'm lesser, and about all of my pesky, pesky guilt, and how I'll never redeem myself from my loving but at least I can walk the Earth hating myself for it.

Maybe then I'll deserve forgiveness I told him how my religion is slipping through my fingers, how I spend hours a day bunching up grains of sand and pouring them back into my mouth, so I can hold a little God there still, so the roughness of my throat reminds me who I am and why I'm broken

*I see God in other people*, I once heard him say, and I'd never been so lost

*I see God in you, he says, I see a powerful, terrific, being who can hurt, I see a nurturer, I see a monster, I see a lover, I see a friend, I-*

I stop him before he goes too far, I realize his praises are prayers.

I want to pray back. I'm on the road to becoming a martyr. I'm on my knees.

He's a God.

He's a secular miracle, he's my many-eyed angel, my Sistine Chapel ceiling, and I know he'll keep fighting it until I fall apart and detach from faith, and the remnants of Creation of Adam are under my feet.

He's holding my hand in the garden of Eden, he's Adam and the snake and the apple. The one who convinced me to sin, the one I converted into a sinner, *and the sin itself.*

And I love him more than I ever have, and I finally understand what the pastor utters when he tells me about worship.

The bile now tastes like nectar, he's my holy grail, I'm blind to those around me,

I convert, I convert, I convert.

## **Pride & Prejudice and Other Afflictions**

Here is everything I said to you that day:

Hey. How have you been? Oh, good.

Yeah, I've been good too.

How's Andrea? Oh, I'm so glad. Is she still-? Ah, that makes

sense. Well, you look good. Yeah, I like the shirt. Oh, thanks.

How's stuff? Ha ha, yeah, I guess stuff is stuff. [Silence]

Do you remember when we-? No, you're right, yeah. Probably

best we don't talk about that. Yeah, I was just trying to reminisce.

You know me, the old sentimentalist.

[Silence] You know... I went by that record store recently. Yeah, the one on Pottinger Street? They asked about you.

Crazy that they remembered, right?

Anyway, you look great. .. did I already say that? Sorry, I'm kinda

out of it. [Silence]



You left a few things at my place, by the way. I still have that annotated copy of *Pride & Prejudice*. Can't believe you didn't notice it was missing. Keep it? I couldn't possibly... okay, okay! If you insist. I will treasure it forever. [Just a bit too seriously to be taken lightly.] Oh, yeah, of course. You must have things to do. Me too, yeah, my day is jam-packed (it wasn't). It's cool that we bumped into each other. I mean, it was... nice seeing you again. [Paused too long for it to be an offhand comment]. Anyway, I guess I'll .. see you around? Take care. Bye. [Broke down in my car.]

Here is everything I wanted to say:

You left your copy of *Pride & Prejudice* at my house, and I can't stop reading the highlighted lines. *One word from you shall silence me forever*, I look at it again and again. And I'm saying many words, but none of them are mine. And I'm wondering whether the ones you want to hear would break this small talk. I miss you, I am famished, come sit on my porch where the bees buzz in harmony. Come drink sweet tea, come be my saccharine darling again. Be my apricot lover in the sweltering heat. I'm hearing many words and yet you are not silenced so maybe here's still a chance. Maybe we can fix this with some honey, glue it together, give into caramelization. We'll bake a fruit tart like back in the day. I want you, I am starving, come make the downtown record store our chapel. There's a somber in your face only I can pick up and I'm trying to hold it. I imagine you as a ray of sunlight on a growing peach tree, I'm sitting under it,

and I feel the labor of your affections as it grows. It's suddenly so tall the sun goes missing somewhere, swept under an astronomical rug, and soon

I'm consumed by your shadow. I exhale in the comfort of darkness, I close my eyes. When I reopen you're still standing before me, asking me about this and that and I'm begging for you to notice my longing.

You left your mark, you're carrying chunks

of me still in that smile. I see you laugh and I'm entranced by the recognition of myself. My mental arms reach out to you, they're making grabby hands. You see it in my face and your mental hands swat me away. *One word from you shall silence me forever.*

I'm struggling to find the right word. Maybe if I find it I'll stop thinking about you. Then I'll have a sense of self that doesn't revolve around being loved.

## **Does Your Mother Know?**

My mother doesn't know my name. I'm sure she's heard it from the mouths of strangers, but I know she looks at me and sees herself.

I open up my mouth and swallow down her past. This pain is mine to bear now, just as she bore her mother's. It's in my bloodstream, I am Pain and Pain is me and it's never been any different.

I am a little child in a Ukrainian summer kitchen, I play guitar, I barely speak English, it's summer of 1987, I'm running around the playground, I'm just as unwanted and everybody looks at me like I'm a smear of dirt, and every time I look at myself I slowly start to agree, and I grow up believing it, and I still do now Except I'm not her. And this absorption is exhausting. The first child, the forever-parent, the project, the favorite, and also the failure, also the weakling, also the disappointment.

Why must I hold in my hands the raw emotions of the past?

Why am I not deserving of a fairytale? Of a childhood? Whom can I blame for this hatred of myself?

I am a young adult in a matchbox apartment, I also play guitar, my English is much better, it's winter of 2020, I'm sitting in my room, and I'm just as unwanted. And everybody still looks at me like I'm a smear of dirt. And I wonder where, just where, the line between it being true and me believing it was crossed, and whether I was dirt at all, and who decided that for me

I was born into this world with a death wish, with a label, with baggage that I never packed and didn't know how to open, and I still carry that guilt about feeling for the latch Suddenly introspection feels like an intrusion into someone else, like everything within my head belongs to her, and I'm just a guest, just a vessel for her second life.

My mother doesn't know my name, but she's going to have to learn it, even if I have to etch it in the walls.

## A Rotting Dollhouse

There's something foreign about coming home, about entering a house that consists of nothing but bare bones and trauma, about awkwardly squeezing yourself into the skin of a perfect child, jagged back practically ripping through it, the horrid flesh of your true self peeking out as you try to staple it shut, and smiling in the mirror to ask yourself Is this it?

Am I worthy now?

*Can I finally be loved?*

I'd never asked you that question. I never had to

You assumed my life had been like yours; welcoming embraces and trips to the zoo and kisses goodnight and extracurriculars and support and loving glances and shopping and bedtime stories and movie night and running around in the park and football matches and board games and dog walking and picnics and the beach and staycations and playgrounds and herb gardens and squeezes of the hand and

reassurance and camping and baking  
cookies and birthday presents and  
love. And love. And love. *And love.* The  
vile, beautiful thing. The word that I  
never got given and now I can't pass onto  
anyone else. The word that lives like a  
tumor in my throat that I can't remove.  
I buried that version of myself years ago  
Every few months I feel it reach its arms  
out from beyond the earth and I screech,  
and I stomp it down, and I know that no  
amount of dirt will cover up what I once  
was. I feel the stapled skin bursting at the  
seams and I know that any minute now  
you'll see what I am and you'll regret ever  
asking

## Saudade

We met in an unknown place in a different life, in a universe unlike our own.

I still remember your face clear as day, a string was drawn between our fingers in that moment. I tugged and it refused to give. I knew you were afraid. You fear losing agency, you don't believe in fate, you detach

Frantic hands pulling out a pair of scissors, damning attachments and sentimentality and twitching with rejection of vulnerability

We can lengthen the string, don 't cut me off but it was too late

I watched the heartbreak thread up my fingers like flame following gunpowder, exploding in my

chest and rendering me destroyed

You look different in this life. There is an unsettling familiarity in your face and when our eyes

meet I can see you were born and raised to hurt me. And I was raised to take it. A willing lamb to the slaughter.



A billion years ago we were in a field in  
the middle of nowhere and you had asked  
me if I loved  
you. Now looking back I understand that  
was an admission. Now seeing you in the  
same light,  
obfuscated by the sun, I silently thread  
the string back up your arm and hope you  
won't notice as  
it crawls up your veins. It isn't a  
violation if that's what God had intended  
for us, I told myself.  
You weren't so sure, pliers in hand and  
betrayal in your eyes. I tell you we knew  
each other in a  
past life and you call me crazy, I ask if  
we should kiss and you slam the door  
into my face. Who  
is this woman I keep seeing in my  
dreams?  
If it isn't you, tell me who it is. If not  
you, who am I meant to run to? Who do I  
have left?  
We can be soulmates by force or by fate.  
God made us this way, we were meant to  
be, you just  
have to trust me.

## **These Are My Raw Thoughts Looking at The Kiss by Edvard Munch at 3:30 in the Morning**

It's an unassuming weekday and we're finally outside the gallery, we're finally hand in hand, you're smiling and I mirror it, you go to the bathroom and I follow you like a shadow

*Let's kiss until we're merging*, let's kiss until I look up at the sky and I'm unsure whether it's night or day, until the keys on the piano have all turned gray and become evenly spaced out, until I step into the ocean and find myself tumbling into the atmosphere

To have our faces sewn together in eternal matrimony is the world's greatest pleasure and curse; I fear that if I let go I'll leave more of myself behind than I intended Aren't you afraid of fusion? Doesn't it unsettle you to think you might look at brown eyes in the mirror and see blue ones staring back at you? What if you lose a part of yourself?

What if you lose it all?  
I worry I'll forget myself if I let go and  
start diffusing into you.  
I'm scared you'll absorb me and I'll  
become translucent, a ghost  
with a foggy past and a future in the  
shape of someone else,  
Though no love exists purely without  
sacrifice; to be seen is to be  
haunted, to be loved is to be buried in  
someone else's backyard, to  
be lost is to spend panic-stricken nights  
digging up your own  
bones

*Remember how I said we're all built from  
stars? Before you  
groan, I'm going to ask that you let this  
be our nucleosynthesis,  
darling, we can be a whole greater than  
the sum of its parts, we  
can be a single bunch of protons and  
neutrons clinging onto each  
other for dear life, we can be an unheard  
of compound, locked in  
a fume cupboard, stored in oil, barred  
between inches and inches  
of lead*

But back to the gallery, we finally make it  
to The Kiss.

I try to enjoy it, absorb its essence, store  
a memory in my head or

my heart, *but I can't stop looking at you.*

Or maybe I'm looking at  
myself? At this point I can't be sure.

## Things I Can't Tell My Therapist

I'm afraid of feeling joy because I won't know what to do in its absence. I'll let my chest expand with laughter and forget how to contract it once I've stopped. It'll leave me gaping.

And what if I enjoy it? Even worse — *what if I deserve it?*

Then I'll spend my life feeling entitled to something so fleeting, running around in search of somebody to grab the corners of my lips and pull them up against my will. I can't look in the mirror without feeling the smoldering disgust rise in my throat. I'm wretched, I'm wretched, I'm wretched.

Every time I lean in for closer inspection my face is charred and ripped at the edges, and my skin is a much-too-sheer wrapping paper trying to cover it all up. It's easier to get through life if you tell everyone you're God's gift to mankind, even if you don't believe it. There's a reason I talk like nobody better exists.

I keep naming myself Abel. I keep leaving sharp tools in obvious places. I've been walking the Earth in search of my Cain to quieten it all, like I knew there was an ending forming in the horizon even when my eyes first opened. If my fate is to die, then let it at least be on my terms. Let me open the door for Cain with a bright smile, let me welcome him in, let me make him the first guest at my funeral. He'll teach me the novelty of brotherhood, and then welcome me into the familiarity of death.

There's blood on my hands again, just like I dreamt about. I know it's not mine. I still want to put it back into my body, the dark sheen of it, the viscous plea for a home. I try to put it where I think it belongs but my body rejects the sacrifice, and me along with it. My body keeps trying to push my mind out of it, and in a way, my mind deserves it. It has nothing to offer to my body but hatred, and now my stomach fights back.

I don't know what being myself means anymore. I am a dressmaker threading needles through my skin like garments, constantly attaching something new to please the eye. What am I worth if I'm not entertaining?

Maybe if I'm bright enough, like the lights of a carnival, or the welcoming petals of a flower, someone will notice me and realize that I'm withering, or flickering. And if not, at least I'll make them laugh.

Oh, how I wish I could hold their laughter in my shaking hands and stuff it into my lungs to teach them what to do; can you imagine me laughing?

I think about death a lot. Not morbidly. *Can you hear the restless cicadas slowly fade into buzzing hospital lights? Can you see the cracks in the roads open up like exit wounds? Death is everywhere to me. The concept holds me, dotes on me, tells me that I have a way out if I need it. Don't you taste the whiskey on your tongue and feel the bitterness in your liver?*

*Your Cain is coming for you too, you know.* Maybe I'm different not because I think about him, but because I've accepted him.

How can I explain to you that the remnants of my trauma will live in the walls of my house forever? I am filled with so much hurt.

I will die in the arms of a stranger before I open up to someone I love. If they really want to know what I think, I'll throw them in an arena with my words like swords, and see how they fare.

Nobody has made it yet.

When people tell me *this is going to hurt*, I always brace myself for the dull sting of overly enthusiastic knuckles. Turns out pain sounds like slammed doors. Like me scratching like a howling dog to get to the other side, begging for my Cain to come faster.

Can you hear my claws leaving marks in the door? Can you hear the walls laughing at me again?

What terrifies me is release, the outpour, the exodus of words unsaid. I intended to



keep my mouth shut, but one day I said  
them all at once.

*I love you. I missed you. We should talk  
more often. You make me  
smile. I hope you had a nice weekend. My  
mom asked about you. I  
saw you in my dreams. I never wanted to  
wake up.*

Catching the words in the air was  
fruitless, my hands flailed with  
a glass jar, a Tupperware container, a  
music box, a palm, someone  
else 's chest

They never seemed to fit, expanding and  
contracting

Just as I thought I'd grasped my last *I  
love you* it fluttered into the  
sky and rained upon a room of strangers,  
a room of undeserving  
ragtags, a wriggling of maggots  
They swallowed it whole and didn't  
comment on the taste  
I'd spent years brewing those words for  
someone else.

Some days, when the freezing cold lights in my room beam down, I grab a dagger and look at the naked handle. Maybe if I engraved it with Cain's name I wouldn't need one. I could be a myth all for myself, and God could finally banish me to a life of wandering.

Better that what I have going on here. I don't want to look at my hands most days. They know what they can do. I know what they want to do. I can't tell you, though.

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# III

# THE COOLING

**On grief, loss, and longing.**

## Little Glass Jar

I dug you up again even though I promised I wouldn't and *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. Every time I tell you it's going to be the last. Every time I shut your eyes and close the casket and lower you into the ground and cover you with fresh dirt and leave flowers and wash your tombstone you into the ground and cover you with fresh dirt and leave flowers and wash your tombstone and then I leave.

There are maggots behind your eyes now, your skin is almost gone, you're rancid, you're degraded, you're falling apart  
And I cradle you in my arms every time as if it's the first. I watch as chunks of your hair remain in my hands and I stuff them into my pocket. It's all I have left, let me have it. I know you'd let me keep it if you were around  
*You know, the Philharmonic played last week, I mumbled against your feeble bones, they got a new flautist.*

*She nowhere near as good as you but  
they stood in silence for a minute in your  
honor*

An insect crawled out of your socket and  
I knew that, up there, you were crying.

*You never even got to play your last  
concert. You never even got to take your  
last bow,* I frowned.

Your lips were almost gone now. I wasn't  
going to kiss them anyway but I wish I  
would've kept them in a little jar; I could  
warm it up and press my mouth on the  
outside of the glass and it'd

almost be intimacy

I could carefully dislocate your arm for a  
little body pillow, or make your bones  
into drumsticks.

Or maybe your skin could be a hat,  
though all that's left are patchy pieces  
that I'd have to stitch together with your  
brittle hair. Your voice box could sit on  
my shelf, and if I tried hard enough I'd  
probably hear you telling me  
you were sorry you'd have to be gone so  
soon. I didn't understand what you meant  
at the time and God knows I should have;  
God knows I could've saved you.

I put you back into the ground again,  
saying this was the last time, but I know  
I'll be back again  
next week. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.



## **It's 4 in the Morning**

I found you loitering in the outskirts of my mind today. Not enough that I could conjure you in my head, but just enough that everything I saw was tickled by the memory of your smile I was watching television and the weatherman looked like you, I turned it off and the book I opened was in your handwriting, I put it away and saw a photo of yours I forgot to take down, I turned around and saw the scarf you never picked up, I closed my eyes and saw you looking back at me. You're haunting me again, like you joked you would. Except it's nowhere near as comforting as mild footsteps outside my bedroom. Instead everything I press to my mouth tastes like your name and every mannequin in every shop window has your body and every song I hear is in your voice and every time I see a bar I picture you on the dance floor. Moving, head thrown back in laughter and hips swaying to the beat, eyes crinkling at the edges and the faint smell of a fruity cocktail on your neck. Alive.

## Teach me How to Build a City

Everything has an expiry date, everything rots eventually, even bones disappear if you give them enough time, but this won't.

His death changed me. I'm a meadow-turned-fortress. I live my life ready to defend. God, if you can hear me, please give me something to cry over.

Something to laugh over.

Something to experience that isn't numbness. Maybe if I remember how to feel I'll be worth something. I'm telling myself that maybe learning how to hurt is the first step to learning how to love, but for now I'm struggling to move past the hurt.

*I'm ready to love and be loved, God, do you hear me? I've made a space in my body for someone else and now I won't let myself fill it. I am trying to make myself digestible. I am trying to make myself easy to love.*

*Are you watching? I've made a bed for Love.*

*The sheets are folded, the extra towels are in the bathroom, please tell me it's moving in for a while, I'm tired of one-night-stands with infatuation. I'm so tired of changing the bedsheets of my heart. Let me hold love in my mouth like a sweet, sweet, wine. I promise I will savor it. I'm a child sneaking into the Lord's forbidden liquor cabinet in search of something to ease it all. I drink any affection I can get without looking at the label. Maybe I'm better Off that way. God, if you can hear me weeping, please remember not to leave me like this. Please remember to teach me how to move on, how to build a city at the bottom of the lake once all the water has drained. Take the tools to weld me back together, and give them to someone who will know what to do with me, who will drill a hole so large that the wind makes my chest whistle - the heart's distress signal out into the wild. Dear God, I know you 're out there.*

You can hear the aching in my bones  
singing that I've had enough. Open me up  
not like a carcass but like a blooming  
flower. Allow me to be beautiful to  
somebody but you. Extend my expiry  
date. Let me love. Let love in. Please.

## Shadow Aspect

*Can I tell you about a dream I had?* She asks, and you nod your head. You're already struggling to think of where to look when she sits up and parts her lips. *I dreamt that I was your shadow,* she says. *I dreamt of my two-dimensional body gliding across the hot concrete alongside you. I dreamt of you basking in the sun, and me basking in you.* She looks at you like she's expecting some sort of response. She looks like a shadow even now, all sunken eyes and vague shapes, and your hand almost goes through her when you reach out to hold her. *Tell me what the other shadows said,* you say to her. She shakes her head, *you wouldn't want to hear it. I don't know if I wanted to hear it.* There's a silence. She gives in. *I remember thinking that being crushed under you was the world's greatest pleasure. The other shadows couldn't stop laughing. It felt like everyone else in the world hated where they were but me. Is it bad that I didn't mind being stuck with you?*

You're at a loss for words again so you pull her closer and pet the space in her back where the wings should have grown a while ago. *You must be terribly lonely*, she tells you, *not dreaming about anything. No companions even when you sleep.* You don't know how to tell her she isn't real, so instead you play along and ask about the dream again. The same dream she told you about three years ago, replaying the conversation you had by the seaside after a day of building sandcastles and breaking them down. *I miss you*, you say to her and she doesn't understand, so she says it again. *Can I tell you about a dream I had?* For once you wish she'd tell you about a nightmare, even one that involved you being picked apart layer by layer. Anything but the godforsaken shadows and their crushing weight again. *Tell me about the moon, about ducks, about postcards and brioche bread, you beg, tell me how you hate me and you're tired of this repetition. Tell me I'm ruinous, tell me to forget you, lie, bite, scream. Give me a good reason to*

*move on.* You want proof that she can't give you. *I dreamt that I was your shadow,* she replies, and you give up rest on the concrete to get some perspective. Looking up at her, you realize there are gaps in your memory, but it's been too much time to repair them. Something about the arch of her nose isn't quite right but you can't quite say what it is. *I dreamt of me basking in you,* she repeats and you pull her not-hands down onto you. She turns into a shadow before she hits the ground and now you're both just empty shapes following someone else. You wonder why you haven't moved on from her. It's been three years. But then she asks, *is it bad that I didn't mind being stuck with you?* And you think you understand what's going on, and what you need to do. *It my turn to tell you about a dream I had,* you say one day. *You were my shadow and I peeled you off the ground and taught you how to walk on your own two feet, and the first thing you did was run far, far, away. Do it again.*

## Your Friendly Diener

Your room always felt like a morgue to me. I could never quite put my finger on it, but there was an overwhelming feeling of *something died here*. Or, more accurately, something was already dead and was waiting to be buried.

*Here's the cold chamber*, I muttered to myself, watching you crawl onto a bed much too small for the both of us. You spread yourself out, and from the way your arms curved up I'd almost considered draining you completely. The tape would go over your eyes, jaw sewn shut, you'd get a sense of quiet that you could have only dreamed of. Instead I joined you in that cold chamber, narrowly avoiding frostbite as we mended into one another, awkward limbs almost always out of place, faster and faster until your torso was mine and mine was yours. I exhaled, you offered a smile.

*What do you think happens after we die?*



I recall you asking, though in my eyes we had already been sealed shut and prepared. They'd dressed you in that black shirt you always hated but wore for special occasions - I laughed until you pointed out I was buried in a tux.

*I'd like to think we reincarnate*, I hummed, as a way to comfort you more than anything. The stitches in your mouth curved down, displeased

Embalming fluid never suited you, but then again, neither did black, and I miss the days when the logistics of your burial weren't your main concern. The days where our visit to the morgue was nothing more than a twisted outing rather than a relocation

I watched you seize in the bed, expression vacant as ever as you regained your body and mine was mine again. For a moment I thought, what if you took mine? What if I could give you mine? What would you do with my body if you held it in the palm of your hand?

You weren't there to reply.

## Griever's Routine

Every day I kiss the indent in our bed  
where you once lay. Of course, I could  
have changed the sheets long ago, and  
straightened them out, and forgotten, but  
I see a small smear of peach lipstick in  
the bottom left corner, and I think to  
myself,

what's another day?

Every day I order coffee for two, and  
greedily drink both. I like to think of it as  
a small offering. Maybe some benevolent  
God will see what I'm doing and you, up  
there, will taste the hazelnut macchiato  
that I so badly hate but force down me  
anyway.

Every day I drive by your office even  
though it's on the other side  
of town. Sometimes, I almost think I can  
see you in the window, and I can finally  
take you home and make dinner like I  
promised that Tuesday.

Every day I stop by the hospital where  
you took your last breath,  
and the nurses give me that look, and I  
don't say anything as I turn around.

They know I come by looking for you. I know I'm not going to find you. They know I'm not going to find you. It's an uncomfortable experience for everyone. I get back in my car. I weep.

Every day I look at the jar of ashes on my mantelpiece. Most days I have self-control. Some days, when my ravenous grief yearns for your touch, I quench it by running my fingers through what's left of you. On occasion I'll bring them to my lips but I stop myself every time. I'm never stooping that low. I have to keep what's left of you.

Every day I skip our shared bathroom, I haven't cleaned out your belongings yet and if I see that Marc Jacobs perfume I might just break down. Every day I shower in the outhouse like a dog. I shiver at the cold. In a way, it brings us together, I imagine you're cold too. Laying in the ground in a summer dress in the middle of January, decimated by rot. My stomach rumbles. I haven't eaten.

Every day I lay awake for hours at a time.  
I roll over ten times,  
I reach for a body that's not there. I can  
feel your presence in the  
shadows on the walls. The howling stray  
dogs scream your name.  
Every day I dream of what would have  
happened if it was me.  
Every day you're smiling, and we're on a  
trip to Paris we didn't  
get to take.  
Every day I open my eyes to a cold bed,  
regardless of the weather.  
Every day I kiss the indent in my bed  
where you once lay.

## May 1 Call This Cemetery My Home?

If you're taking my secrets to the grave,  
you might as well take  
me with you. Hold my hand in the  
cemetery of our conversations,  
point to the tomb where I asked, *what are  
we?*

Step over the overgrown underbrush and  
ignore my probing questions

The leaves of your apologies crunch  
under my feet as I race you to the finish  
line, to the hollowed out oak tree which  
calls out to us in the night

Press me up against it, kiss me, listen to it  
rattle with our bones and words unsaid,  
let it sing a melody as the wind blows  
through it and we hear shouts of a long-  
forgotten argument.

This cemetery is my home now. The  
bodies are my mentors, the stray dogs are  
my friends, the grass is my resting place,  
and you're... something dear to me that I  
can't quite phrase. But  
you're here.

You step over to the gravestone and it  
says *I miss you* on it, and  
it's almost too painful to look at, covered  
in cobwebs and mold and dirt, obscured  
by tall grass and time

I see you walk toward it, soft hands  
grasping at the soiled layers like you're  
trying to save something still alive and  
breathing, though your care for me is  
now nothing more than an engraved  
rock

Your inspection makes me nervous,  
anxiety-ridden eyes searching for  
meaning in an inanimate object, trying to  
assign meaning themselves, praying for  
someone to come around and explain  
why non-living things can hurt so bad

You turn to me and I look away. The  
words are engraved in my handwriting,  
the rock starts to feel like my skin

It's not that I don't miss you, surrounded  
by the yellowing trees  
and matted grass, it's just that I no longer  
understand you in a way  
that lets me care.

The fears bubbling under the surface are ravenous but I'm stronger, and I leave you in the weeds as I run to my only solace,  
the only memory worth keeping, the one immortalized in a statue, the one that strikes tears when I lay my eyes on it. You're standing in the kitchen making pancakes, and I wrap myself around you with flour on my hands. I take a step towards  
your smiling face and caress the soot that has gathered up underneath your eyes  
The pancakes taste vile, the batter's raw, the kitchen's a mess, and we're laughing. The leaves are crunching under my feet again and suddenly I'm desperately aware of my all-consuming loneliness. In this cemetery of dreams they turn to nightmares not  
via horror, or gore, or violence, but through a deep, irrevocable longing for something we no longer have.

## **Baruch Dayan Ha-Emet**

*Shemira*, I told you, we *stand over the body from the moment of death to the moment of burial*. It's a watching, it's a guarding of the soul. One of these days you'll stand over me too, dearest. You won't read Tehillim but you'll speak psalms of your own.

*Baruch dayan ha-emet*, you hear them utter, and you picture me stood before an eternal judge. There's no doubt in your heart that the cause of my reckoning will be the last three years you have been in my life. *Damn you, love, damn you.*

*Damn it all for letting you come close.* And now you're afraid they'll bury me as a sinner, and now you're afraid you're a sinner too This way, we're closer, in sickness and in health, and for a few hours it's easy for you to forget that I'm dead and unmoving as you rest by my side. I'm paler than I was, but that's no matter, I'm still listening to your incantations about what could have been, about what you did today, about how I



looked at the scene of the crash. You're caressing my hair and I give no response *I miss you. I miss you. I miss you*, you say words I can't hear, and the empty room responds with a scoff. Your hopefulness was never your best trait, I'll admit, and I'm watching you sob, and I'm watching you sob, and your hands start to shake, and you grasp both my sides, and you curse to Hashem about the state of things.

And you wish I was in the ground already so you wouldn't have to think about it.

And you wish you were in the ground with me so we wouldn't have to think about it, together. You must lay me down, you'll wash me all over, I can't be face down so you'll have to look in my eyes. I have to be dressed in all white but it doesn't matter, you don't recognize me when my skin is so pale, when my face is so swollen, when my eyes can't look back. I look like a nightmare, you know I will haunt you. The worst part is you can't tell if you want it or not.

Then you'll see me in the simple, pine, casket. It doesn't suit my skin, but it's all

I can have. You'll listen as people read out their eulogies, you'll wonder if you should've prepared one too. What would you even say? *There's my lover, in that casket. No one knows we're lovers, and they've taken off his promise ring for his burial. The last thing I said to him was to get home safe. He didn't. I never converted, I can't even be here.* Everyone is looking at me and my askew kippah. They know something's off, they can tell it's not normal. Everyone sees it in the way I look at him. You know I understand, I'm looking down at you. I'm shouting at you from a different dimension to go forth and find love in somebody else. But you're kneeling as they lower me, and nobody knows why you're screaming, and you're trying not to let anything slip in fear they will discard of my body like the sin that I am. After all that's been, I deserve a tender burial. Allow me that with your silence, and keep your memory. I promise to watch over you if you learn how to move on.

## **A Fall of Restless Longing**

The grass is yellowing now, the weather  
sulks, the insects hum a  
quiet dirge  
Leafless trees are torn asunder by  
howling winds. I'm standing in  
a field amongst the leaves.  
A bird perches on a branch where its nest  
once was  
It doesn't feel regret or loss, but its little  
beak pokes into the holes  
where it scavenged for worms. It tweets a  
sigh at emptiness  
The tree bark's warm, I lean against it, the  
wind's relentless as I  
sob. I'm overwhelmed not by feeling but  
by vacancy.  
My lungs ache with a sharp desolation at  
the cold.  
My breath condensing in the air is my  
one companion, I try to  
catch it in my hands and hold it close.  
The sky is darkening now, I look around  
and the leaves are gone.  
Now it's just me and the yellowing grass,  
and I'm yellowing too.

And now the sky is yellow and so is my  
breath.

I sit down closer to the ground, I hug it,  
the grass begins to grow

on top of me, I let myself be covered

Soon I'm just another patch in the field,  
begging for an ounce of

sunshine

I am consumed by grief

## **When Pain Becomes Tangible**

The ache I can't name lives in my chest.  
She peeks her eyes out every once in a while. She often lives between the pages of a scribble in a notebook, done in a 2AM frenzy of loneliness when I know the pen is my only friend.  
She holds my hand when I walk past your block on my evening outings, tugging me towards you and then away.  
She silences my laughter and amplifies my sadness, she drinks tea by the gallon, she hauls my fingers to your phone number in my contacts, she holds my thumb over the call button, she teases me until I throw it across the room.  
She wakes me up at night with whispers of your name. Quiet ones at that, imitating your voice until I'm unsure whether it's a monologue or duologue.  
She finds you in things I'd never paid attention to. She tells me you would've liked that sweater, that salad, that nook behind the river. She sees your face in the crowd over and over, grubby little

fingers mangling my friends' features into you.

Ache doesn't care about my day-to-day life; she does as she pleases, she came to visit and hasn't left for two months.

Ache keeps leaving blood under my fingernails. Ache keeps putting words in places where they don't belong, tears streaming down my face in conversations with my professor, swears coming out of my mouth towards my family.

Ache builds weights into my arms and legs. She wants me to stay in bed just a little longer, never explaining how long that will be. A few hours, a few weeks.

Ache cancels my plans for me. She'll make me sleep so I won't show up, or remove things from my calendar, or make me postpone at the last minute, or forget completely and let me deal with the damage. At least she's consistent in her need to pull me apart. And yet, when Ache isn't here, I feel like a part of me is gone. *Like some of me will always be defined by longing.* She disappears when she's certain she's the only one I have left.

I'm trapped in isolation and broken ties.  
*Come back, I don 't have anything left,* I'd  
plead, body glued to my sheets and phone  
in hand. She left me hollowed out once  
again, a space forming in my stomach  
that I couldn't fill. She ignored me.  
Fine, I said, anxious fingers swiping to  
my contacts once again, eyes glued on  
the familiar digits.  
If Ache wasn't going to come back, I'd  
get her back. She's the only thing I knew.  
She's the only  
thing I deserved.  
I dialed your number again.

## Matthiola Longipetala

1

*And those are the matthiola longipetala, I heard him muse for the thousandth time, rough hands grazing over the beckoning petals. Their smell is the strongest at night.*

The dinner table felt like a reset point; we'd sit opposite each other and he'd explain what life was like in the USSR. Tell me more, I always asked, but he wanted to talk about the flowers. I had no trouble reminding him that they'd soon wither and fall to pieces and he'd call me a cynic

Truth be told I never absorbed his optimism but if I got close enough, sometimes I got to bask in the joys of seeing the world through hopeful, wise eyes; I would spend nights sitting in his office chair and imagining myself as someone as important as him, feet dangling and barely reaching the floor

It was his throne. If you had asked me, I would've confirmed he was a king.



We'd just come back from a fishing trip,  
face kissed with the sun's tomato redness,  
an ice box

full of wriggling little beasts, head clear  
with the grounding of the ocean

*We be of one blood, ye and I*, he smiled,  
quick hands gutting the fish with no  
hesitation. It writhed for just a moment,  
then stopped.

I watched in awe, little fingers gripping  
the counter, knuckles turning white from  
excitement as he explained. I marveled in  
his certainty and guidance, patiently  
awaiting instruction

Such a silly thing, to hold guts in your  
hand and acknowledge that they once  
pumped in unison to form a life, and now  
they're nothing more than tissue dripping  
in between the fingers of a curious boy  
*You can't be too rough with it*, he told me,  
*you have to make sure you respect the  
fish.*

*It died for  
you*

3

Years later, I made eye contact with him  
in the casket.

I didn't even get to see him writhe - the  
flight was too late and I was stuck  
piecing together

memories of him moving. Behind closed  
eyes he stood behind me as they carried  
him away, hand on my shoulder

Such a silly thing, for someone to be  
alive and suddenly be gone. Such a silly  
thing to pretend

like you have any other choice but to live  
and move on. Such a silly thing to years  
later, see the

same wrinkled eyes staring at you in  
pride

*We be of one blood, ye and I*, I whispered,  
just like you always used to say. And we  
were. That

day I felt half of the fluids drip out of my  
body and leave me shriveled

The dinner was a blur of halfhearted  
condolences and fruitless offerings.

*Do you want to go to  
dinner? Go shopping? A concert? Meet  
the president? Fly to the moon?*

Truth be told, I wanted to be on a little  
fishing boat in the Black Sea, being told  
off for rocking as

I watched calloused hands reel up another  
fish I remember thinking I'd never seen  
someone so magnificent

I stepped out into his old garden.  
Everything had withered just like I said it  
would. I cursed myself for jinxing it all  
I cursed myself for not calling enough,  
for not hugging enough, for turning down  
his offer to watch bad television. I cursed  
myself for ever being annoyed  
If he was back I promise I'd never be  
annoyed again. That word would leave  
my lexicon along with any other one if it  
meant I could sit on the kitchen counter  
and watch him cook beef stew  
I dug my hands into the soil where the  
matthiola longipetala once grew and  
brought it up to my nose, wondering if I  
could smell the lingering aroma  
*We be of one blood, ye and I*, I whispered  
for the last time, sitting cross legged on  
the ground. I know, up there, he heard  
me, because  
the sky shone bright and the  
soil felt warm

## The Future

*Tell me about the future again, she begs me, and I sit on the couch beside her with my legs outstretched, and I sink into her. I can see in her eyes that she needs this, so I begin. The heaviness goes away someday, I say. You won't magically open your eyes and see greener pastures, but there will come a time where you will find something to do with all that hurt. I can see your delicate hands building a fireplace, darling. You kindle it, and for a moment you sit there and realize that this is The Future. The very one, the one you've been dreaming of ever since the rapture. And you feel your stomach in search of a pit and it isn't there even if your hand knows where to look. You're breathing softly now. You got tired of sealing up cracks so you broke the whole shell, and this nudity of the soul is relaxing. Tomorrow is a new day and the ceiling looks like stars, and you know that with enough will you could join them if you wanted. You know that you are capable of anything. If you*

*took your hurt and built a fireplace, you also took me and built a man who wants to spend the rest of his life with you. We're not in The Future yet but I can see you, clear as day, smiling ear to ear. Almost as if it's happening right in front of me.*

*I open up my eyes and I do see her smiling. I continue.*

*You've learned to apologize less. You know what love feels like now, and you realize you spent so many years trying to find it in places where it could've never bloomed. You hold things closer now, every house is a home, you 're not afraid of standing in the corners and letting the dark join you. Nighttime isn 't a reckoning, it's an embrace. You can close your eyes and see gardens and not cemeteries. Your fingertips and heart are no longer cold, you 've learned to put on gloves where appropriate, you've learned to sit closer to the fireplace to stop the sporadic shivers. You get nervous sometimes still, mostly when you picture yourself in a vast field with nobody around, but you focus yourself and you*

*build yourself a city.* My voice ricochets from the clouds to the ground. It's yours to keep. My affections are your property, I want to nurture you, help you sprout more leaves. Can you feel yourself growing? Can you feel yourself healing? In this one moment, the present is playing a little game and blending with The Future that we built. I know it because her eyes gleam with life. *You know*, she says, *we should build a fireplace.* It's the first time I've seen her smile in months.

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