



issue 1

countercare

on
loneliness
and belonging



COUNTERCARE didn't start as a publication—it started years ago, as something almost intangible.

It began with a feeling I couldn't quite place. Just that something was missing. I was in queer spaces, surrounded by people I should have felt connected to, and still... not quite. It wasn't that anything was wrong, exactly. Just that the connection felt fleeting. You could have a great night, a real conversation—and by the next day, it had already dissolved.

It shouldn't be this hard to find each other. Or to stay connected once you do. But for many queer people in this city, it is. If anything, it feels like it's getting harder.

So about two years ago, I set out to build a different kind of space—Prince Peach. Something a little quieter, a little more open. A place that gives people the time and room to actually connect. One of the first things that came out of that was a small writing group. This was before the bigger events we have now—before the drag brunches, the shows, the screenings. It was just a handful of queer writers meeting regularly, supporting each other. Talking through projects, sharing doubts, reminding each other that our perspectives matter.

At first, that was enough. But over time, something shifted there too. We didn't just talk about writing anymore—we started writing together. Small things at first. Prompts in the moment. Seeing what would happen if we just gave it space. And slowly, it grew into something more intentional.

COUNTERCARE grows out of that process.

More than a year of showing up. Of sharing work. Of figuring things out together. Of trusting each other enough to put something on the page and let it be seen—whether it's a poem, a short story, an essay, sometimes just a fragment, sometimes something else entirely. What you're reading now comes from that trust—not just individual pieces, but something shaped in a shared space, over time, together.

A real community.

The theme we chose for this first issue together is *Loneliness & Belonging*—the distance many of us know, and the ongoing effort to close it.

The pieces collected here move through that space in different ways. Taken together, they begin to form something larger: a sense of connection that doesn't rely on chance, but on participation.

Only in hindsight did we realise how closely this reflects what brought us here—how a shared sense of loneliness might have drawn us together, and how, by showing up again and again, we've started to build something like belonging.

It's a small publication, but it doesn't feel small. And we are not treating it like a one-off. We want this to continue—to change shape, to involve more people, to spill into other forms, other collaborations, other parts of the city. What matters is that it keeps moving, and that the people in it keep showing up for each other.

If loneliness is something many of us know, then maybe belonging is something we practice.

This zine is proof of it.

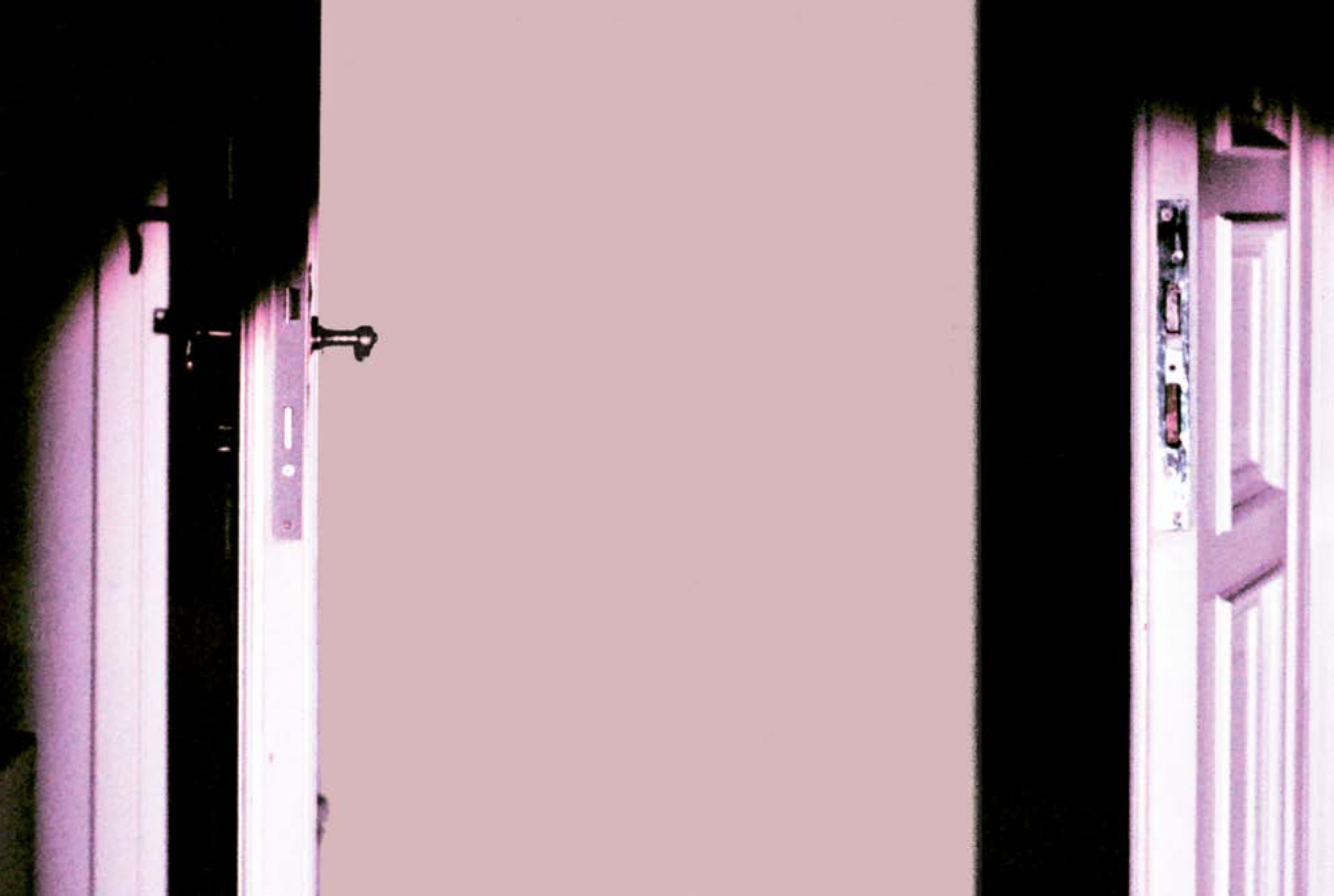
We're glad you're here.

KEVIN BÜCHNER



inside

9	Keep Your Hands on the Wheel at All Times	TOM BARREK
14	Selected Poems <i>Lonliness</i> <i>Longing</i> <i>Belonging</i>	EMILY PYE
16	Just One of Those Mornings	SAM HEIKKILÄ
22	Haunted	
25	The Purpose	KEVIN BÜCHNER
45	Why Can't You Just Be Like the Others? <i>Queer Knowledge and the Burden of Seeing</i>	MAIA GEORGE
50	pie(r)ces	FRANCESCA SCHICCHERA
54	The Right Temperature	JJ MAHAL
58	(Un)sent	COLLIN
67	Quinn	TOM
70	Changing Hearts	DES WASSERFALL
79	Selected Poems <i>Trajectory of a Snake Waltz</i> <i>New Normal</i>	MAGO CLUSTER
82	Selected Poems <i>die unmittelbare stimme der augen / the immediate voice of the eyes</i> <i>inmitten des neBELs / in the midst of the fog</i> <i>die zugehörigkeit des ichs / the belonging of the self</i>	LOE PEREIRA
90	Dude, Where's My Belonging?	EUN (SAM) SHIM
101	Meine Königin	MATTHIAS STELTE
106	A Sunday	LARA A. SPRINGS





keep your hands on the wheel at all times

TOM BARREK

Have you ever been on a road trip by yourself?

Of course you haven't. It'd be silly to do a group activity like that all on your own, right? In the perception of others, when you fill the seats of your car with your loved ones, it becomes a journey. When you slam that door shut and hit the gas all by your lonesome, it starts to look like an escape. Like you need to get away as soon as possible. It's a fruitless endeavor. But who's gonna do it for you?

There's no one to take over for you at the wheel when you lose focus. The tank runs out on the road and you have to refuel it all on your own. Pop a flat tire, it's up to you to get it back up to top condition... and worst of all, on the road to your destination, you drive past so many other cars. Shiny or old makes no difference—what matters is that their backseats are filled and passengers present.

It stings. And sometimes, it feels as though the only person I can blame for it is myself.

I've felt like that a lot in life. Like it's a given that everyone around you has absolutely zero issues finding new friends. The feeling that there's something you lack that other folks never even had to learn. Finding people to take places, doing whatever it takes just so you don't have to show up by yourself. There exists an expectation that makes it seem self-explanatory. As if it wasn't work & effort, self-respect, a history of finding out what you want (or don't), an adulthood's worth of second-guessing yourself to overcome in the moment. Inexplicably, everyone else just seems to get it. But you weren't born with it, you never got to learn, and now you're paying the price. A trial by fire in the coldest of environments—the unknown.

For reasons I can grasp but not empathize with, I oftentimes find myself getting compliments when I talk about this. I don't feel like I 'open up' when I do—all it is is a simple truth. I tell someone that I go to have dinner out by myself, I go to concerts by myself, I go to the movies by myself, anything. The response: 'praise'

You're so brave. I could never do that.

And what did I do that was so deserving of praise? Not inhibiting myself from doing the things I actually want to do with my limited time? A concept that's hard to fathom for those who have always been surrounded by friends, family and their perceptions. It's not an accomplishment to me. It's my lived reality.

I do a lot of activities by myself. Most of them I have no qualms with nowadays, some I never had any to begin with. Something that gets me a lot of admiration from others is when I visit other countries on my own. I need no better reason than 'I want to' —but that doesn't seem to be enough for some people. As though it were a requirement to have someone to tag along with to give that sort of trip a purpose; no, not just a purpose, but to even make the trip in the first place. How come, when there are few things as liberating as being somewhere far away from your base where no one knows you or what might happen to you? You become unchained from your usual daily shackles, all thanks to the distance you've now put between you and your responsibilities back home.

It's an exhilarating rebirth. You turn into someone that, unfathomably, possesses all the tools needed to paint their canvas exactly the way they want to. You go out. You sightsee. You taste new flavors on your tongue. You speak new words. Things you'd never do back home become manageable—undemanding, even. The air around you changes, and no one questions it. You're only there for so long, so every bone in your body aims to make the most of it. In this interstice of time—a day, a weekend, more—you rule your own world. The fully packed car has become yours to pilot, ready for adventure. The horizon looks just a little broader and brighter. You start feeling like you're in full control. And you want it to become the norm, not just another high to chase.

To this day, concerts still pose the biggest risk for me. I love live music and supporting my favorite artists, so going to experience them in person is a no-brainer to me. But on a bad day, the visual of being at a concert by yourself can be humiliatingly isolating.

Think about it: you're all by yourself and seemingly everyone and their mom is there with a friend, or two, or even more. You're caught in a crowd more 'successful' than you. People that have simply done better at the social game of life, that have been dealt better cards. Sometimes, I think the others have to have just picked the first person off the street because I can't explain to myself otherwise just how everyone seems to have friends to take out for all sorts of activities, especially something as personal as your taste in music. Of course you want to be present in the moment and enjoy who you came to see, but every bone in your body wants to scream at you to go.

The cherry on top is when that same main stage act lets their heart hang out of their ass and in a declaration of love tells everyone to do something like hug the person they came with, to hold their hand, tell them how much they love them. It's a pointless game for me to play. You look through the crowds and are met with, on the surface, an ocean of kinship, but its waves are impossible to part. There's no way in.

People who seemingly found each other and are in this moment together with one another—they have it figured out and bask in the glory of having someone who cares about them; be it superficially or deeper than that. Not a soul pays attention to the fact that I spend the next minute standing by my lonesome. Empty-handed. In a mosh pit of estrangement. And the second it's over, the earth keeps turning. And the waves of a 'superior' crowd continue to cascade over me—it's all I can think about as I head back home.

By myself.

When I look at the people around me, I find it seems as though they carry no burdens whatsoever. It always seems so effortless on the outside. People have been driving their cars all their life. It's self-explanatory. And it's what makes it feel so frustrating. The possibilities for things to take a wrong turn are endless, but how would you ever know? Those possibilities can only be perceived by those inside the vehicle. And you're not about to climb in through the window, sit down with the rest and be an inconvenience, are you?

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Alone doesn't automatically equal feeling lonely, we all know that much by now. And I wouldn't say I feel lonely—but you do feel left behind sometimes. You are the alien: the one that tries to fit in, yet deep down, feels isolated by the fact that everyone around you knows something you don't. Your car isn't on the road like everyone else. You fly above them in your spaceship, traveling on another plane than the average person. It makes you wonder—how can it be that the human craves community, yet can make it so hard for themselves to discover it? Finding friends or just approaching people can feel like a mountain to climb.

Those few friends you do have, when you're not questioning how you got them in the first place, you cherish beyond anything else because you're scared of losing them or drifting apart. It shouldn't feel so precarious.

And it does make me wish it was easier.

Driving is an *asinine* amount of responsibility. Getting on the road is never just as simple as turning the ignition, knowing where you want to go and how to perfectly get there. On some days, it feels like sitting down and strapping yourself in a death machine on four wheels. The task feels monumental—you have to be in control of your vehicle every waking moment so as to not endanger yourself or anyone around you, stranger or loved one alike. You have to keep your eyes on the road. You need to make sure you don't take a wrong turn somewhere. Without someone to point it out to you, how will you even know if the turn you've taken is 'wrong', or just another detour among many? A joyride to kill some time to push your obligations back? How come everyone has that person to point it out to them and you, somehow, no matter how perfect you drive, don't?

Passengers come and go. And they do come—even if you need the stars to align for it, even if you need to come across the one person who struggles with this even harder than you. There will always be someone. Be it for a reason, a season or a lifetime.

The scenery out the window changes. What will never change is the fact that you're the one in the driver's seat, regardless of who you invite into your car.

I think that's where the weight to ground all these feelings really lies. All my life I've felt as though a lot of the responsibility to get things going is on me. That no one is gonna 'do it for me.' I've grown so accustomed to it that for the longest time it hadn't been a thought in my mind that that would ever be possible to change. I've been driving this car by myself for so long—because no one else would—that the fact I may no longer have to do so by my lonesome is, even now, sometimes incredibly difficult to fathom. Decades of my life have gone by, carrying the feeling that I can only rely on myself to get the job done—not something you can unravel in a matter of seconds. All for the purpose of giving up full control of the wheel.

It'd feel nice to have, sometimes. The feeling someone can have a genuine interest and investment in me. No longer feeling like I'm the only one who doesn't know. The idea of letting someone else into my passenger seat. Enjoying the roadside view out the window. Someone to chat with on the long journey. You put on a song that the other person doesn't yet know is about to become an all-time favorite for them.

It would feel nice.



Loneliness

Alone on my own
Separate from family
Distant from friends
Feeling fractured radiates inward
I don't know how to belong anymore
Lost in myself
Removed from my body
Stuck in my head
Floating forward in a heavy haze
I don't know how to belong anymore
Searching for answers
Seeking a sign
Looking for something
Fishing frantically for a resolution
I don't know how to belong anymore
Gaze in the mirror
Consider the reflection
Swallow the discomfort
Forseeing fatigue coming at me again
I don't know how to belong anymore
Buy different clothes
Cut my hair short
Change my outward appearance
Fashioning form through change
I don't know how to belong anymore
Reach to my partner
Create a community
Learn from my mistakes
Finding forgiveness day by day
I don't know how to belong anymore
Who am I now?
What will I become?
Where is the next step?
Falling freely into a new me
I will know how to belong again

Longing

I long to belong
I long to belong to a world full of love, like me
I long to belong to a culture full of joy, like me
I long to belong to a country full of care, like me
I long to belong to a city full of spontaneity, like me
I long to belong to a community full of gentleness, like me
I long to belong to a lover full of passion, like me
I will always long to belong unless I belong to me

Belonging

I reside in a body,
A body that gives me strength
A body that can hold those around me
A body that will do what I ask it to do
But,
Sometimes it's hard to belong to this body
Sometimes the parts that I have lived with my whole life feel wrong
Sometimes it feels like a strangers when I touch it
Because,
My mind doesn't always agree with reality
My heart doesn't align with what my outside presents
My soul doesn't want to be told what it is
And,
I know that it is still mine forever and always
I know that it will change in ways that I want and I don't
I know that it cannot be everything I ever wanted
So,
I will learn to embrace it in all the ways I know how
I will work to find harmony between body and mind
I will find new ways to celebrate it for all that it has given me
For,
I can be me in this body
I can love life in this body
I can belong to this body



just one of those mornings

SAM HEIKKILÄ

Alex opened his eyes to complete darkness. He felt cold not just in the air, but inside his bones. He was lying on something hard and tried getting up, hitting his head on something metal almost instantly and falling back down. Slightly panicking he started to feel around him, trying to place himself. There wasn't much room to maneuver, but Alex figured he was in a box of some kind. Almost like he had been put in storage for later use. A shiver went through him and he suddenly realised that he was completely naked, which would explain some of the coldness he was feeling. As his brain caught up to speed and started adding all these things together, Alex understood what was going on. He had been put in a cold locker.

Panic rose in his throat and he started kicking and banging the walls and the locker ceiling on top of him, making as much noise as he could. He tried screaming, but no sound came out, just a dry cough which sent pain down his throat. As tears started falling down the side of his face, he kicked the back of the locker, trying to move the slab he was on towards the door, hoping to escape the darkness. Unfortunately, all Alex managed to do was hit his head on the door, earning him an instant headache. He couldn't get out of here on his own, someone would have to open the cold locker door and let him out. Alex continued making noise, hitting the walls on both sides of him. Someone was bound to be around. Morgues had people working in them, right?

Alex was right. Someone was working at the morgue and had heard the noise coming from the cold locker. Francine stared at it from the other side of the room with her cell phone in hand. Who does she call? This was never covered in training. There was not supposed to be noises in the morgue. That's why she had taken this job. She didn't like noise, and she didn't like people, so the morgue seemed like a great way to avoid both. It has to be an animal. Somehow a badger or something had managed to get into the lockers, didn't like it there and now wanted out. Sure, that's what it was. This wasn't the Manchester Morgue, there were no living dead here. Still, she'd rather not take chances. She'd call someone to come help. She scrolled down to her boss's number on her phone and just as she pressed call, the banging from the locker stopped.

Francine held the phone up to her ear, listening to the ringback tone and staring at the locker. She had started moving towards the locker door slowly without realising it. She jumped up with a small scream when she heard a man's voice.

"Francine? Is everything alright?"

It was Bert, her boss on the phone. With slight embarrassment, but mostly relief that she wasn't in the situation alone anymore.

"Hey Bert, sorry for disturbing you. I heard something from one of the lockers. Is there a chance that someone is still alive in one of these lockers?"

“That’s highly unlikely, Francine. Are you sure your horror movies aren’t just getting to you?”, Bert said with a slightly condescending tone in his voice.

“No, I mean it, Bert. The movies aren’t getting to me, they’re making me call for backup before I do something stupid like opening a noise making cold locker on my own. Can you come and take a look at this with me?”

Bert sighed at the other end.

“Sure. Give me five minutes and I’ll be there. I’ll make sure I’ll get the Ghostbusters with me, just in case.”

“This feels more like zombies than ghosts. Do you have a gun or an axe? Just as a precaution.”

“Francine, I was just jok...A gun? No, I...Just stay put, don’t touch anything. I’m on my way.”

Bert hung up and Francine moved her phone down from her ear. Her eyes had not left the locker for a second.

Alex was tired and scared. He felt like he couldn’t breathe. No one was coming, there was no sense in wasting all his energy banging the walls around him. He needed his energy back and flailing around wasn’t going to do it for him. He tried swallowing again and his throat felt like he was ingesting gravel. Screaming for help was definitely out of the question. Taking a breath, Alex let his hands rest on his chest. He felt something there. It felt like a piece of string. Puzzled, he tucked on it, feeling instant pain all through his chest. He slowly ran his fingers along the thread, feeling scar tissue that he didn’t remember getting. At least whatever it is was stitched up, Alex thought. Suddenly he heard something outside the locker. Someone else was there.

Francine looked at Bert who gave her a short nod as she moved slowly towards the locker door. The weapon selection at the morgue was unsurprisingly limited, he was brandishing a fire extinguisher and aimed it forward. Francine’s hand reached toward the handle of the door.

“Mr. Harris? I’m Francine from the mo...”, she said, before realizing that telling him where they are might be rather alarming. She tried again.

“I’m Francine. If that was you making the noise earlier, don’t worry. We’re here to help. I’m opening the locker. Please, stay calm. We’re also”, she swallowed, “doing that.”

Francine took a deep breath as she grabbed the handle and pulled the door open.

Alex was suddenly blinded by shining lights that flooded the locker. He tried to yell out in shock, but it got caught in his throat and came out as a groan instead. He moved his arm to shield his face from the brightness, but he didn’t have enough space to do that. Fighting off the panic he felt taking over him, he kept his eyes shut as closed as possible and pushed with his feet again. As he moved into the light, he heard a loud scream right next to him.

Francine jumped back in horror as the slab started moving. Her scream surprised herself as well. She looked at the body now in front of her. It was alive. Somehow a live person had been put into the cold locker. Someone was going to be in big trouble and she really hoped it wouldn’t be her.

She got him out of there, she’s the hero here, if anything! The body, Mr. Harris looked fine to her, a little blue in the face, but that was probably due to the cold locker.

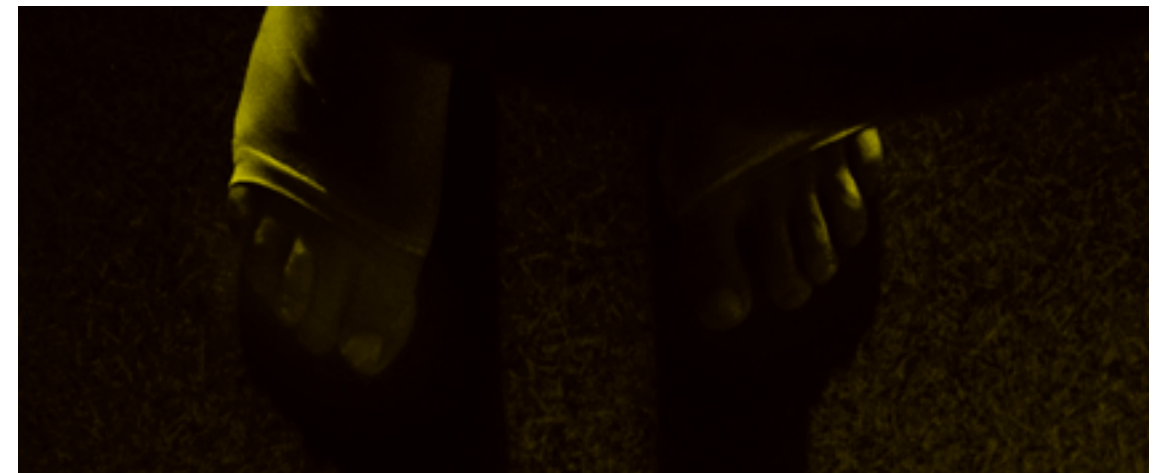
“Mr. Harris? Alex? Can you hear me? You’re going to be fine.”, Francine said softly, trying to get Alex’s attention. It seemed to work as Alex turned his head towards her and looked at her through slitted eyes.

“Umm, hi. Mr. Harris,” said Francine, trying to find her words.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but don’t worry! We’ll get you sorted. I’m Francine and this is Bert”, she motioned toward Bert, who was still aiming the extinguisher at him. She gave him a stern look and he put it away sheepishly. She moved back to look at Alex and was startled as she found him sitting up on the slab.

Alex’s head was pounding, blood rushing to his head now that he was out and in normal air. He was able to look around, his eyes finally used to the light. He saw two people, a young woman and an older man, and she was talking to him. He wasn’t able to focus on the words she was saying, but she looked concerned and scared. He looked around the room, instantly recognizing where he was. Realization struck him instantly and with a shocked face he looked at the young woman who had stopped talking and was staring at his chest.

Francine saw the scar on Alex’s chest in the shape of a huge Y. Her breath got stuck in her throat as she had the same realization as Alex did. He wasn’t here by accident at all. Her next scream was not a surprise to anyone.





Haunted

I return here
Thinking it's only to pick up things
But when I walk in
I see things old and new

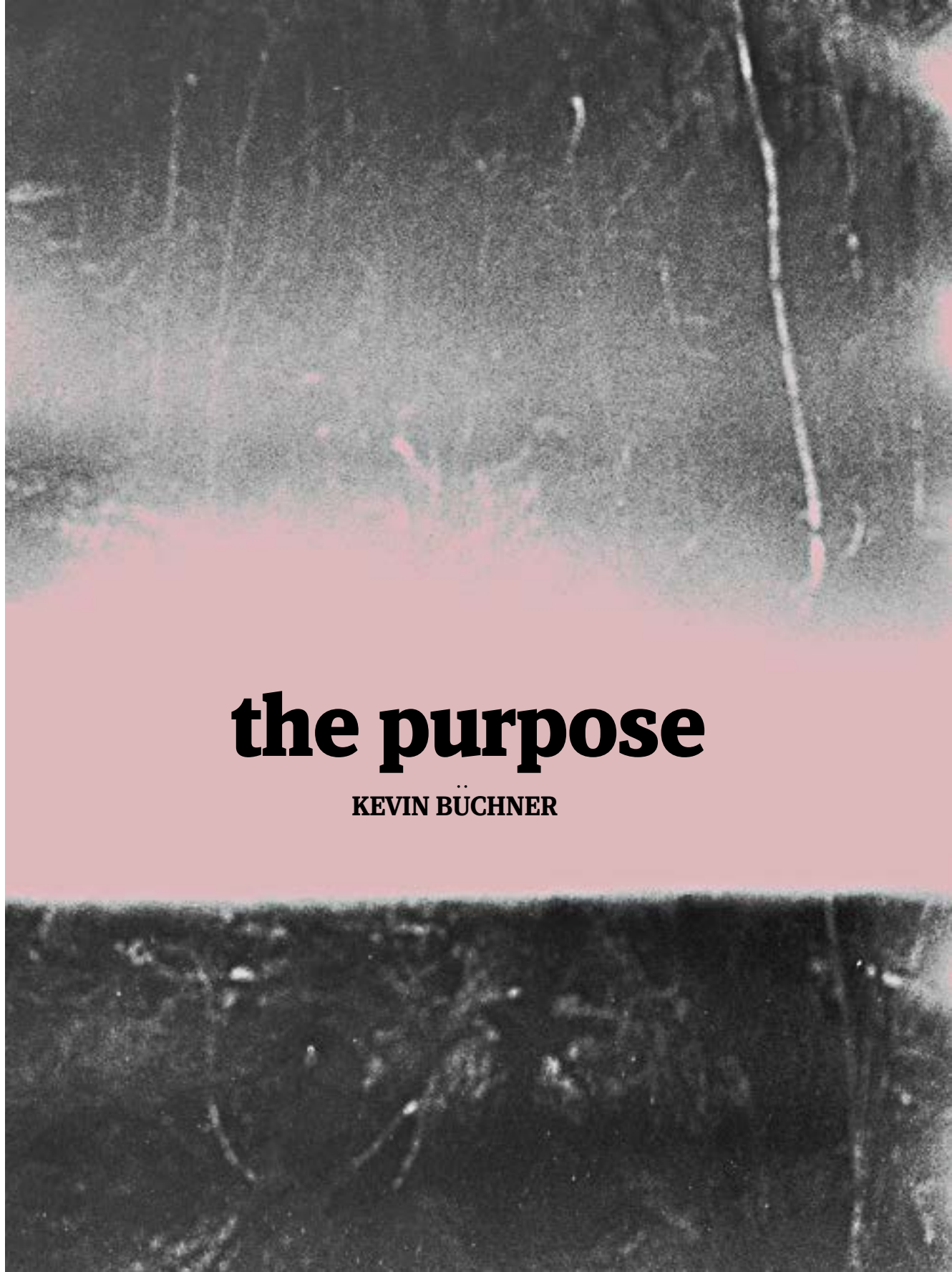
Everything is in its right place
What has changed is me
I have left this place
But the house remains

Life continues here
New memories made all the time
I'm no longer part of those
Not irrelevant, but still history

I see myself in the rooms
Present, but gone
Familiar, but not the same
I get my things and leave

The house remains
With life, past present and future
The house is haunted
And one of the ghosts is me





The last time I saw my brother, he walked down the road without looking back.

He stepped off the gravel at the edge of the field and onto the asphalt as if it were something already decided. The road ran straight for miles. In summer, the heat rose in thin waves until distance bent and blurred. That morning, the air was clear. I watched him grow smaller with each step, his shoulders steady, his hands loose at his sides. I kept waiting for him to turn.

He didn't. At some point the light swallowed him. The road shimmered, and then there was only brightness where he had been.

I was nine that summer. Our house stood at the edge of town, the last one before the dead field and that same stretch of asphalt. From the porch, you could see everything—the field, the road, the horizon that never seemed to move closer no matter how long you stared. My mother liked that. “At least nothing sneaks up on you,” she used to say.

That was before anything did.

It began in spring. My father started standing on the porch after dinner and watching the road—not casually, not distracted, but as if listening. “What do you see?” my mother asked him one evening. “Nothing,” he said. My brother Aaron was the first to sense something. “He’s waiting,” he told me. “For what?” He shrugged. “Something.” My other brother Daniel laughed when he heard that. “You two read too many ghost stories,” he said.

He was seventeen and already practicing certainty; he liked clear lines—right and wrong, strong and weak, here and gone. If our father shifted his weight, Daniel shifted too. Aaron was fourteen and did not mirror anyone. He tried, sometimes. Not the way Daniel did—clean and eager—but like someone practicing a language in private and still getting it wrong. He paused before speaking. He looked at people longer than was comfortable. I stayed quiet and watched them all.

The boards appeared in early June. They were stacked along the fence one morning—clean, pale lumber that didn't match anything we owned. My mother ran her hand across the top plank. “That’s a lot,” she said. “It’s handled,” my father replied. “With what?” He didn't answer.

The first post went into the dead field that afternoon. Daniel followed without being asked, holding the beam steady while our father drove it into the dirt. The sound carried across the yard.

By the end of the week, Mr. Halpern from the factory came through our side gate with a ladder. Then Karl Weller, who had lost his night shift in March. Then Tomasz, who worked maintenance at the school. They spoke in low voices while they measured and lifted, like there was something you could scare off by naming it too loudly.

Another square was marked out to the right of my father's, then another to the left. Each one faced the road. They helped each other raise beams, but each man claimed his own frame. “What’s it supposed to be?” Mrs. Keller called from her garden one afternoon. “You’ll see,” my father said. “For what?” “To be ready.” “For what?” He glanced at the

road. “You can feel it.” Some nodded at that. Others didn't.

Within two weeks, Daniel's friends began drifting in—boys from his class, boys who talked about leaving town and never did. At first they treated it like a project. “This is kind of cool,” one of them said, climbing halfway up a frame. “Not secret,” Daniel corrected when someone called it secret. “Important.” They worked shirtless in the heat, laughing, competing over who could climb higher. Aaron stayed near the edge of the field. Tomasz asked him once if he was building his own. “Not yet,” he said. Once Daniel tossed him a hammer without looking. Aaron caught it, held it too long, then walked it back and set it on the sawhorse like it was hot. Daniel's friends watched him the way you watch someone drop a plate. Aaron's ears went red. He wiped his palm on his jeans as if the wood had left something on him.

The structures grew stranger as they rose. They were too narrow to be rooms, too open to be towers, too irregular to be decorative. Crossbeams were placed at inconsistent intervals. Some leaned forward slightly. “It's not level,” Aaron said once quietly. “It doesn't have to be,” my father replied. “Why not?” “Because it's not for now.”

The heat deepened. Some of the men began missing work. “They're talking about it at the plant,” my mother said one evening, setting down her bag from the clinic. “They think it's... a distraction.” “It's not hurting anyone,” my father said. “Not yet.” Daniel bristled. “They don't understand.” “Understand what?” my mother asked. “That something's happening.” “What?” He hesitated. Aaron looked at him sharply. “What exactly do you think is happening?” Daniel flushed. “You can feel it,” he said finally, echoing our father. That was the first time I heard him say it.

Before the month was out, the field held eight frames. People slowed their cars to look. Some stopped. And some began speaking more plainly. I heard Halpern say one evening, when he thought no one else was close enough to listen:

He is coming.

Someone gave a quick, embarrassed laugh. “Sure. And he's bringing jobs with him.” No one laughed back. Karl nodded solemnly. Tomasz muttered, “Don't say that in front of the kids,” but he didn't deny it.

At dinner that night, my mother asked directly, “Who is coming?” No one answered at first. Daniel stared at his plate. Aaron looked at my father. “You can call it what you want,” my father said carefully. “That's not an answer.” “It's change. It's reckoning. It's—” “It's a man?” my mother pressed. He hesitated. “Something.” Aaron's chair scraped softly against the floor. “Have you seen him?” “No.” “Then how do you know?” My father didn't raise his voice. “You can feel it,” he said again, and this time it sounded less like a phrase and more like a conviction.

Later that week I came home from a friend's house and found men in our kitchen drinking water. They didn't ask. They nodded at me like I belonged to the furniture. The yard had flattened into a path. Tools leaned against the porch. The bathroom mirror was streaked with sawdust fingerprints. “This isn't a meeting hall,” my mother said that night. “It's temporary,” my father replied. “Until it's done.” “What is it?” He did not

answer.

That was when the hammering began to carry past sunset. Floodlights were dragged into the field. Extension cords ran from our house into the grass. Shadows from the unfinished frames stretched long across the road. Neighbors began closing their windows. Mrs. Keller came through our gate after nine one evening. “My youngest can’t sleep,” she said. “It won’t be much longer,” my father replied. “You said that yesterday.”

Standing at the edge of the porch, I felt something move under the air that had nothing to do with heat. Aaron felt it too—I could tell by the way he stood very still. My mother watched the field as if trying to see where it would end.

By July, men were no longer cutting shifts. They were skipping them. Daniel stopped talking about school. He talked about weight-bearing beams, alignment, reinforcement. My mother began leaving the electric bill open on the counter instead of filing it away. “They’ll shut it off,” she said one evening. “They won’t,” my father replied. “How do you know?” He didn’t.

The field no longer looked accidental. Seventeen frames stood upright now, some taller than our roofline. They did not enclose space or protect anything; they rose in angles and crossbars that suggested intention without revealing it. From a distance they looked almost ceremonial. Up close, they made less sense. More people joined. At first it was friends of friends, then cousins, then women who had come to watch and found themselves handed hammers. “It’s not just the men,” Mrs. Halpern said one afternoon, wiping sweat from her forehead. “We can build too.” Some joined because their husbands were there. Some because they were tired of being alone in quiet kitchens while the field hummed with energy. Some because, for the first time in years, the town felt like it was moving in one direction.

After that, the house stopped being ours in small ways—mud, cups used by strangers, doors that wouldn’t quite close—each detail too petty to fight until it wasn’t. A ladder was left leaning against the hallway wall overnight. My mother wiped down surfaces that would be dirty again within the hour.

At night, the construction stretched later. Floodlights hummed. The hammering settled into a rhythm that did not break when the sun went down. Mrs. Keller came again. “My youngest is crying. It’s past ten.” “It’s temporary,” my father answered. “Until we’re ready.” “For what?” He didn’t say the word, but others had begun to.

One afternoon I heard my mother on the phone in the hallway outside the kitchen. “If it keeps going like this, I’ll bring the kids to you for a while,” she said quietly. “No. He won’t come.” There was a long pause. “I don’t know what it is anymore. It’s not just a project.” I stood very still until she saw me and lowered her voice. When she hung up, she smiled too quickly. “Go wash your hands,” she said. “Dinner soon.”

That night she argued harder than usual. “You’re not sleeping. You’re not going to work. People are in our house all day. This is not normal.” “It’s necessary,” he said. “For what?” He didn’t answer. Aaron watched them both as if memorizing something. “People are talking about leaving,” my mother said. “They’re scared.” My father looked

at her steadily. “They’re scared of missing it.” “Missing what?” Aaron asked. My father didn’t answer.

By the end of the month, more people had stopped going to the plant entirely. The pastor mentioned preparation in his Sunday sermon and then insisted afterward that he hadn’t meant it that way. The field looked crowded now—not finished, but intent, and there was a difference. A notice pinned to the door of the small community center read “Town Meeting. Concern regarding nighttime disturbance and employment absenteeism.” My mother stared at it longer than anyone else. “Good,” she said quietly. “Let someone explain this.” Aaron looked at the field. “They will,” he said. He didn’t sound relieved. He sounded certain. And for the first time, I understood that whatever my father believed was coming, he was not the only one who believed it anymore.

The meeting was held on a Thursday night in the community center, where ceiling fans pushed the heat in slow circles without cooling anything. People filled the folding chairs and stood along the walls. Some came straight from the field, shirts streaked with sawdust. Others came dressed for a formal complaint—arms folded, jaws tight. My mother sat beside me, her purse on her lap like she was about to leave at any moment. Aaron leaned against the back wall near the exit. Daniel stood near the front, close enough to hear everything.

The mayor cleared his throat and unfolded a piece of paper that no one expected him to read from. “We’re here to address concerns regarding the construction in the eastern field,” he said. Someone muttered, “It’s not construction.” Mrs. Keller said sharply, “It’s noise. It’s missed work. It’s lights on past midnight.” Halpern answered, “It’s pride.” Someone else shot back, “It’s disruption.” Voices overlapped until the room felt like it might tilt.

The mayor raised both hands, palms out, the way he did at ribbon cuttings and school assemblies, a gesture that used to work. “Enough,” he said. He tried again, louder. “Enough.”

No one stopped. Not out of cruelty—out of momentum. People kept talking as if his voice were part of the ceiling fan.

Someone near the back said it plainly: “Who is coming?”

The room quieted. It was not asked mockingly. It was asked carefully. Halpern shifted in his chair. “You can feel it,” he said. “That’s not an answer,” Mrs. Keller snapped. Tomasz added, “It’s not nothing.” “Say it, then,” someone pressed. “What do you think is happening?” Silence stretched. And then someone said my father’s name.

He had been sitting two rows ahead of us, elbows on his knees, listening. He stood slowly—not to command attention, but because it was his turn. For a moment he did not speak. The room waited. “You want to know what we’re building,” he said. “Yes,” several voices answered at once. He nodded once. “I don’t know exactly what it will be,” he said. “Not yet.” That unsettled some people. “Then why build it?” someone called.

“Because we’re done waiting,” he replied.

“For what?” the mayor asked. “For anything,” my father said. “For work that doesn’t

vanish. For someone to remember this place exists. For our kids to believe there's something here worth staying for." Daniel straightened. "We've been sitting still for years," my father continued. "Watching shifts get cut. Watching houses empty. Watching the road carry everything away from us." He gestured toward the east wall. "You think the world out there is coming back for us? You think they're planning something for this town?" No one answered. "They're not," he said. "So we're building something ourselves." "A tower?" someone scoffed. "A beginning," my father said. The word hung there.

"You talk about noise," he went on. "About missed shifts. What exactly are we preserving? A plant that's already shrinking? Houses people can't afford to heat?" He did not shout. That made it worse. "Out there, we're working together. We're doing something with our hands. We're not just waiting for whatever comes down that road." "And what is coming?" Mrs. Keller demanded. My father hesitated only a moment. "Change," he said. A few people laughed uneasily. "You can call it what you want," he continued. "Reckoning. Correction. Maybe it's just us finally standing up straight." He looked around the room. "You can feel it," he said, softer now. "That something's shifting."

Halpern nodded. Karl too. "It won't wait forever," Halpern added. Someone asked again, "For what?" Halpern said, "For us to be ready." There it was. The word settled differently now. Ready. The mayor wiped his forehead. "And if nothing comes?" he asked carefully. My father held his gaze. "Then at least we'll have built something together."

Silence followed. It was not agreement. But it was not dismissal either. Daniel began to clap. It was tentative at first, then steadier. A few others joined. Some remained seated, arms crossed. My mother did not clap. Aaron did not move. He was not watching my father. He was watching the room.

On the walk home, no one spoke for a long time. "What do you think?" I asked Aaron quietly. He kept his eyes on the road. "I think they wanted to believe him," he said. "Do you?" He didn't answer.

The news vans arrived three days later, in the worst afternoon heat. Two white vehicles rolled slowly past our house before turning toward the field, dust following them like smoke. Daniel saw them first. "They're here," he said, and the way he said it made my stomach tighten.

The hammering didn't stop so much as hesitate. Men held nails between their teeth and waited to see if they were being watched. A reporter stepped carefully through the flattened grass, her shoes sinking into the grooves the wheelbarrows had made. "What are you building?" she asked. "A beginning," Halpern said, almost proud. "For what?" she asked, and for a moment it sounded exactly like the town had sounded at the meeting.

My father stepped forward. He did not smile. He did not posture. He looked past her shoulder once, toward the road, then back again. "To be ready," he said. "For what?" she pressed. "For change," he answered, and it came out clean, like a word he'd practiced

saying without flinching.

That evening the segment aired. We stood in the living room and watched our field framed in clean edges and soft music. From that distance the structures looked deliberate. Symmetrical. Purposeful. The reporter called it renewal. She called it agency. She did not mention the odd angles, the floodlights, the bills left open on the counter. She did not mention the way people lowered their voices when they said *He*.

Daniel replayed the clip twice. "They get it," he said. My mother watched without moving. "They make it look different," she said. "Better," Daniel replied, and in the glow from the television his face looked older than it had in the field.

For several days the cameras returned—sometimes at noon, sometimes late enough that the floodlights were already humming. They filmed hands passing boards. They filmed my father measuring and adjusting beams with a quiet patience that read as leadership on-screen. People who had never stepped into the grass began arriving as if the broadcast had granted permission. A retired teacher said she'd seen it on the news; it looked hopeful. The word settled easily among the beams. Hopeful. Like it belonged there. I heard someone say, "If they keep filming, the plant won't dare close on camera."

Work began earlier. It stretched later. Complaints continued, but they sounded smaller now, almost petty against attention. It was easier to join something that had been filmed. It was harder to stand outside it, where you could be seen doing nothing.

He is coming.

Not shouted. Not preached. Said in passing, like weather. Most of them said it like a line they'd learned, careful not to sound foolish, careful not to be left out. With the cameras circling, the town learned a new way to say old things. Preparation became pride. Readiness became a story you could tell about yourself without sounding afraid. I heard even Aaron say it once, late, like he was testing how it sounded in his own mouth. The words came out flat and wrong. He didn't try again.

People began calling my father by name in ways they hadn't before—asking where the next frame should face, what should be reinforced, what he thought. The mayor stopped arguing and started visiting the field. The pastor came by and stood at the edge as if waiting for an invitation. My father kept speaking softly, and people leaned in to hear him.

Daniel spent entire days out there. School slipped into the background. His hands grew calloused. When newer frames rose higher than the first, he volunteered to climb. "Be careful," my mother called once as he scaled a crossbar without a harness. He grinned down at her. "I've got it."

From the top he could see beyond the town, and he liked describing it at dinner. My father nodded, proud. Aaron didn't say much. When he did, it was never about the clips. It was about the beams.

More than once someone tried to press a measuring tape into his hand, smiling like it was a peace offering. He always gave it back without letting his fingers close around it.

By mid-August, the field had its own rhythm. The plant reduced shifts again. More

men stopped going entirely. “They can’t fire all of us,” Karl said. “They can close,” my mother replied, but her voice carried less certainty than before. The frames now formed a corridor along the road—rising on both sides, irregular but intentional. From a distance, they looked like a procession frozen in place.

“Feels like we’re finally someone,” Daniel said one evening beside my father as they surveyed the field. My father did not contradict him.

Aaron stood apart. I found him once near the far edge of the field, looking not at the structures but at the road itself. “You think it’s working?” I asked. He didn’t answer immediately. “I think it’s changing people,” he said. “Isn’t that the point?” He looked at me then. “That depends,” he said.

The accident happened three days later. It was late afternoon. The heat had not broken in weeks. The air shimmered above the road. Daniel had climbed higher than anyone else. His frame was one of the tallest now—crossbeams stacked at irregular intervals, leaning slightly forward like the rest. From the porch, I could see him near the top, one hand gripping a beam, the other reaching for a plank. My father stood below, looking up. “Watch your footing,” he called. Daniel laughed.

Then the beam shifted. It was small at first—a tilt barely noticeable. Aaron saw it before anyone else. “It’s not level,” he said sharply. The plank slipped. Daniel’s foot searched for purchase and found nothing.

He fell.

The sound he made when he hit the ground was not loud. The hammering stopped all at once. For a moment no one moved. Then the field rushed inward. My mother was already running. My father reached Daniel first. He did not cry out. He knelt. He placed his hands on Daniel’s shoulders as if steadying him for another climb. Daniel’s eyes were open. He did not speak. The floodlights were still humming. Someone said, “Call an ambulance.” Someone else said, “It’s too late.” The frames cast long shadows over the road.

And for the first time since the boards had appeared, the field felt completely silent.

They carried him into our house. My mother knelt beside him on the living room floor, saying his name in the same voice she had used when he was small and lost in a store. My father stood very still. Aaron did not step forward. He stood near the doorway and watched. He wasn’t memorizing Daniel’s fall. He was memorizing what the others did after—the half second where they could have admitted it was wrong, and didn’t.

The mayor stood in our doorway, sweat darkening his collar, his hands empty as if he’d come to show he wasn’t part of it. “We need to stop,” he said, very plainly. Halpern didn’t look up. Neither did my father. The sentence sat in the room like a tool no one recognized.

The ambulance came. The cameras came after, in the thin daylight that makes everything look more honest than it wants to. This time they did not ask what we were

building. They asked about safety. About liability. About regret. They filmed the height from below and the tilt of the beams that had seemed like nothing until it wasn’t. They filmed the patch of dirt where Daniel had landed. The reporter’s voice went careful, as if she had to handle the story with gloves. The words changed. They said *experimental*. They said *unauthorized*. They said *tragic*. One of them said *pointless*, and that word stuck to the air the way sawdust sticks to sweat.

At night the segment aired without music. The field looked less like a beginning and more like a mistake that had grown too big to admit to. Daniel’s name appeared briefly on the lower third of the screen and disappeared. The label remained longer than he did.

After that, the vans left. They did not come back for updates or angles or hope. They took the story and closed it.

The field remained.

The funeral was meant to be held at the church, but by then the church already felt too small for what had happened. People gathered there anyway, half the town pressed into the pews, the unfinished structures visible through the windows like a second architecture rising behind the altar. The pastor spoke about accident and youth and the unknowable will of God. He did not mention preparation. He did not mention readiness.

Afterward, the talk shifted. “He built higher than any of us,” Halpern said quietly outside, near the fence. “He believed.” “It can’t just end there,” Karl added. My mother heard them. “He’s being buried,” she said sharply. “That’s how it ends.”

But it didn’t end. By evening the conversation had changed shape. A few of the men stood beneath Daniel’s frame and looked up at the crossbeams he had insisted on placing himself. They spoke in low voices, not conspiratorial, just practical.

“He prepared,” someone said. My mother stepped forward. “Stop.”

“He built this,” my father said, his voice steady but different now, as if he were trying on a language he hadn’t used before. “It should hold him.”

“That’s not what it’s for,” she said. “For what, then?” he asked. She had no answer that would carry across the field.

The next morning there was no procession to the cemetery. No lowering into earth. Instead, a small group carried him out at dusk, when the light was thinning and the structures cast long shadows toward the road. My mother did not follow at first. She stayed inside until someone came for her. When she stepped into the grass, it was already done. The frame looked the same from a distance, beams intersecting at odd angles, leaning forward. Only when you stood close could you see that something had been secured within it, wrapped carefully, placed where he had last stood.

“He prepared,” Halpern said again, softer this time. Aaron didn’t look at the wood. He looked at the faces. Something in him went quiet, like a door closing. My mother closed her eyes.

She stood beneath Daniel’s structure the night after the broadcast. The floodlights

had been turned off, and the beams were only darker shapes against the sky. “They think it was pointless,” she said, not to my father but to the wood. “They think it meant nothing.” No one contradicted her.

The next morning, she put on gloves.

She did not choose a square far from Daniel’s. She chose one near it, smaller, lower, measured carefully. She drove the first nail herself. The sound rang across the field and did not echo. “I won’t let it be nothing,” she said when Aaron asked her why. He stood with his hands in his pockets, watching her line up another beam. “It’s still nothing,” he said quietly. “It’s just wood.” She flinched as if he had struck her. “It’s not,” she said. “He believed.” “That doesn’t make it true.” “It makes it matter.” Aaron looked from her to the road and back again. “You almost left,” he said. She paused. The hammer hovered in her hand. For a moment I thought she might answer him honestly. Instead she said, “I’m not leaving.” He did not argue after that. But he did not step into the field either.

From then on, when my mother came home from the build, her hands were raw and her voice was quieter. She no longer left the electric bill open on the counter. She no longer spoke about taking us anywhere. The house grew emptier in a different way. Daniel was gone, and Aaron began to drift from the center of things, pulled outward by an opposite gravity.

The field did not pause for long. Grief turned into labor. More frames rose. The word prepared settled into conversation like a rule rather than a hope. And when people spoke of Daniel now, they did not speak of the fall. They spoke of his height.

Aaron stopped going near his brother’s structure. He walked the perimeter instead.

After my mother began building, the field stopped feeling like a project and started feeling like a border. If you stepped into it, you belonged. If you didn’t, you were seen.

By early autumn, only a few families had not claimed a square. Marek’s was one of them. So were the women who ran the diner—Ellen and Ruth, who had always stood behind the counter together and never corrected anyone’s assumptions, though no one ever quite named them either. The diner grew quieter by the week. Builders ate in shifts at the field now, passing around coolers and thermoses. “We don’t have time to sit,” Karl said once, like sitting had become a moral failure.

Aaron began spending more afternoons at Marek’s house. He left after lunch and returned after dark, his shirt smelling faintly of detergent that wasn’t ours. Unlike other friends, he never brought Marek inside. He never introduced him at the table. When Daniel had friends over, the house grew louder. When Aaron had Marek, the door remained closed. I always knew there was something different in the way he said his name.

They sat on the back steps or walked the far edge of town where the field dipped toward the creek. From the porch I could see them sometimes, standing too close and then not close at all. When the hammering from the field rose, they lowered their voices. “It’s easier if you just build something,” Marek told him once. I heard it because the wind carried the words. “Easier for who?” Aaron asked. “For everyone.” Aaron didn’t

answer right away. The wanting was in his face before the refusal was. “Easier,” he said finally, “is how they get inside you.”

The strain showed up first in the lights. One street went dark for a night, then two. The plant reduced hours again. My mother stopped pretending the bills would sort themselves out. A few houses flickered and stayed that way. The field, however, remained lit. Someone had brought in generators. The floodlights hummed even when the rest of the block sat in shadow, the frames rising out of darkness like ribs.

At the grocery store, shelves thinned. Fresh produce disappeared first. Cans replaced it. Mrs. Halpern began organizing deliveries directly to the field—water, bread, whatever could be secured. “It’s more efficient,” she said. No one declared that only builders would be fed first, but that was how it happened. Those who spent their days in the grass did not go hungry.

The mood shifted quietly. No speeches. No proclamations. Just glances that lingered longer. “They were never really in it,” I heard someone say about Marek’s family. “They keep to themselves,” someone else added.

Marek’s father had always spoken with an accent that softened certain words. His mother kept her curtains half drawn even before the building began. They were polite. They paid their bills on time. They did not attend the meetings. Now that difference looked like defiance.

One evening I came home to find my father standing at the window, watching the far end of the street. “They still haven’t built,” he said. Aaron stiffened behind him. “It’s their yard,” he replied. “It’s everyone’s future,” my father said, and there was no softness in it. My mother said nothing, but she watched Aaron the way she had begun watching the electric meter.

Two days later, Marek’s family began packing their car. There was no announcement. Just boxes carried out in the late afternoon heat. The floodlights were already warming up for the evening shift. A few people paused in their hammering to watch.

Aaron stood at the curb. “You could stay,” he said. Marek looked at him for a long time. “With who?” There was a silence that felt heavier than the beams in the field.

“If you were a girl,” Marek’s mother said gently, almost apologetic, “we’d think about it. But we can’t take someone else’s son.” She meant it kindly. That made it worse.

The car door closed. The engine started. They drove down the same road that had carried nothing else in months. No one waved. Aaron stood there long after the dust had settled. When he finally turned back toward the house, I saw something change in his face. Not anger. Not even grief. A kind of narrowing, as if the world had reduced to one remaining direction. From then on, he did not leave in the afternoons. He walked the perimeter of the field instead, hands in his pockets, watching the structures rise. The glances followed him openly now.

Sometimes he stepped onto the asphalt and stood there for a moment, like he was checking whether the road would hold him. Then he stepped back, looking slightly embarrassed. My father began watching Aaron the way he once watched the road. My

mother watched him differently—with worry, with calculation, as if she were measuring how long a person could stand outside something before it swallowed him anyway.

By then, the field stretched on both sides of the asphalt, frame after frame leaning forward in imperfect unison. The town felt smaller, tighter, brighter at night and darker everywhere else.

And Aaron was the only one his age who had not prepared.

By October, new lumber ran thin. The trees near the creek had been cut back to stumps. Still, the frames demanded more.

It was Karl who said it first. “There’s wood standing empty every Sunday.”

The pastor called a meeting. Fewer people spoke than before. No one raised their voice. “Not the church,” someone said. Karl didn’t turn. “It’s wood,” he said. The pastor’s hands lay flat on the table. His fingers flexed once, and he looked down like he couldn’t bear to watch himself do it. Then he nodded—small, almost invisible—and I understood they hadn’t come for permission. They’d come for surrender.

They began the next morning. The cross came down first, unscrewed and passed hand to hand into the grass. By the end of the week the church stood open to the sky. The white-painted beams reappeared in the field almost immediately, hammered into new frames as if they’d always belonged there.

Aaron stared at the stripped foundation. “It was never about faith,” he said quietly. “No,” my father answered. “It’s about readiness.” The word no longer sounded hopeful.

After the church, other buildings followed more easily. An abandoned porch here. A collapsed barn there. A house whose owners had already left. Boards were salvaged, nails straightened and reused. The town began consuming itself with methodical care. More frames rose, reinforced with church beams and salvaged planks from empty porches. The generators hummed through the night. Houses dimmed in patches. The field remained lit.

The first death after Daniel was Mr. Halpern’s brother, who had come in from out of town to help and climbed higher than he should have in the heat. He did not fall. He simply stopped, hand gripping a beam, and slumped where he stood. By the time they lowered him, his face had already gone gray.

“He worked,” someone said. “He prepared,” another answered.

He was integrated into the structure he had been reinforcing. No debate. No hesitation. His widow stood beneath the beams and nodded once, as if accepting an exchange.

A week later, Mrs. Keller’s husband collapsed near the tool crates. His heart had always been weak. The ambulance took longer to arrive than it once would have; the road seemed farther from services now. By the time they carried him back from the hospital, the decision had already been made. His name was spoken in the same breath as Daniel’s. Prepared. Committed. Part of it.

Each time, the integration grew quieter. More efficient. Less whispered.

The field began to hold them. The structures thickened with memory. People spoke of it as honor. As continuation. As proof that nothing was wasted. Aaron stopped attending the vigils. He watched from the road instead, hands in his pockets.

The diner stayed open through all of it. Ellen and Ruth had run it for years. They fed the men now building in the field. They did not build. Not at first. By the time Ruth marked out a narrow square near the asphalt, the language had already shifted. Prepared was no longer a hope. It was a classification.

Ellen did not claim one.

The day she entered the field was windless. The generators were running; the houses were dark. She walked between the frames without looking at anyone and stopped beside Ruth’s structure. Her hands were empty. She had not marked a square. The beam behind her had not been fully secured and couldn’t withstand their disagreement. One quick shove. It tipped. The wood struck her across the shoulder and drove her down into the frame. It was over quickly. The hammering stopped. Then resumed, farther away.

Ruth knelt. My father stepped forward, checked for breath, and shook his head once. No one raised their voice. Someone said, “She didn’t prepare.” The words were not angry. They were procedural.

I saw one woman turn away, hand pressed to her mouth, and keep turning until her face was blank again. “She didn’t prepare,” someone said again, and the sentence closed over everything. Ruth’s head lifted sharply, as if the words had struck her. For a moment her mouth opened—an intake of air that wanted to become a sentence. Then she looked around at the faces already turning blank, already filing what had happened into the rule, and her mouth closed again.

There was no discussion of integration. Ellen was carried out of the field. Her body did not return to it. Ruth’s structure remained standing.

Aaron had been near the road. I saw him take one step back. He did not look at Ruth. He looked at the others. And whatever doubt he still had about the rules ended there. After that he stopped flinching when people looked at him. He began looking back, calm enough to scare them.

By the time the leaves began to thin, there was no one left over twelve who had not claimed a square. Except Aaron.

Even the older men who could barely lift beams had marked out small frames and let others reinforce them. The oldest women hammered once and stepped back. It was less about labor now than about alignment.

Prepared. That was the word.

Ellen’s death had settled something unspoken. The rule had revealed itself: those who built were absorbed; those who did not were separate. Aaron remained separate. He walked the edge of the field each afternoon, hands in his pockets, watching the frames lean forward in imperfect unison. The glances that followed him were no longer

curious. They did not rise to anger either. They had the flat patience of a decision that had already been made.

My mother began noticing who stood too close to him, who spoke his name without warmth, who lowered their voices when he passed. One evening she found him at the sink, staring at his reflection in the dark window as if it were someone else's face.

"They're talking," she said quietly. He didn't ask who. "You can build something small," she said. "It doesn't have to mean anything." "It does," he replied. "It can just be wood." He shook his head once. "If I do it," he said, and paused. "It counts as yes."

My mother flinched at that word. She opened her mouth, then closed it. Behind her the house hummed weakly; beyond the glass the field was brighter than the rooms, floodlights bleaching the beams into pale ribs.

That week the town decided the project would be finished before winter. Every remaining space along the road would be filled. Even the children would mark their ground. Even the elderly would drive a single nail.

"It has to be complete," I heard Halpern say. "No gaps."

The phrase lingered on the field. It was repeated the way Prepared had once been repeated—softly, casually, self-evident. My mother began to lock the front door, though it no longer kept anyone out of the house. It only made her feel like there was still a boundary she could touch.

She called us into the kitchen that night. The lightbulb above the table flickered once and steadied. The field beyond the window held its glow. My father sat with his hands flat on the wood.

"You know what they're saying," my mother said. "You know what happened to Ellen."

Aaron remained standing.

"You can build something small," she said again. "Just enough."

"I won't," he answered.

My mother's voice tightened. "They'll hurt you." My father looked up then—not at her, but at Aaron. His face held no anger. It held something worse: a kind of acceptance that did not soften into mercy. He could have lied and made her feel better. He considered it. Then his face tightened—not with stubbornness, but with the effort of not becoming someone else.

Dad spoke quietly. "They won't," he said.

My mother turned to him, sharp. "You don't know that."

My father didn't raise his voice. "They won't," he repeated, and there was nothing comforting in it.

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

My father's eyes stayed on Aaron. "Because," he said after a moment, and the pause felt like the distance between two posts, "he isn't part of it. He never was."

No one answered that.

The next morning the youngest children were led into the field. Small squares were

measured. I was handed two thin stakes and told where to place them. Mrs. Halpern smiled at me kindly as if this were a game. "Just a little one," she said. "So you're part of it."

I pushed the stakes into the dirt where she pointed. The ground was hard from weeks without rain. I felt nothing in my hands except the resistance of packed soil. I felt my mother's gaze behind me like a hand on my shoulder. I felt Aaron's absence as a cold pocket in the air.

By dusk every space along the road was claimed. Except one.

We gathered before dawn.

No one announced it, but the whole town seemed awake. Porch lights clicked on and off. Doors opened and shut without voices. People crossed yards carrying nothing. In the night, at some point I did not hear, the generators were shut down. The sudden quiet did not feel like relief. It felt like holding your breath on purpose.

The field stood in grey pre-morning light, the frames rising on both sides of the road like an unfinished procession. Without the floodlights, the beams looked darker, less like clean lumber and more like bones. The crossbars leaned forward. The salvaged planks still showed their history—white paint, old nail holes, a faint ghost of stained glass pattern on one board that had been placed upside down.

My mother stood beside her structure with her gloved hands clasped together so tightly the leather creased. My father stood near the center of the road, shoulders squared.

The smallest children were lifted onto shoulders. The oldest women leaned on canes. People had come dressed for church and for work at the same time: collared shirts under jackets, boots on the damp grass. Aaron stood apart—not far, just enough. In the one open space left along the asphalt, the gap looked brighter than it should have.

We waited.

The road lay empty for a long time. The horizon was a thin line of paler grey. Somewhere behind us a dog barked once and then stopped.

Then a shape appeared at the far edge of the asphalt.

At first I thought it was distance bending in the cold, the way it bends in heat, but the shape did not shimmer. It moved steadily forward, each step placed without hurry. As it came closer, it resolved into a person walking alone.

He wore nothing remarkable. No uniform. No symbol. A dark coat that did not move much in the air. Shoes that did not scuff on gravel. From where we stood, he looked almost ordinary.

But there were things that didn't fit. His shadow fell wrong—slightly to the side, as if the sun had already risen from a place it wasn't. The damp on the road did not darken under his feet.

He walked between the frames without touching them. He did not glance left or right. His gaze stayed forward, not fixed on the horizon, not fixed on us, but on some point a few feet ahead of his own steps.

When he reached the center of the field, he stopped.

Silence held. Not the silence of fear, exactly. The silence of a room that has agreed to follow a rule it didn't know it was learning.

The figure's head turned slowly. Not scanning for faces. Not searching. He looked down the rows of structures as if measuring. The frames leaned toward him in their imperfect unison, and the sight of that leaning—of wood arranged to resemble devotion—made something in my throat tighten.

Then he stopped turning. He stood at a middle distance, not close enough to be greeted and not far enough to be mistaken for distance. He did not speak. He did not lift a hand. He simply waited.

No one dared to fill the waiting with language. Even the children were quiet.

My father was near the center of the road, shoulders squared the way they had been all summer. He did not step forward. He did not step back. His mouth opened as if he might speak. Then he shut it again. Around him, people shifted—weight moving from heel to toe, a hand tightening on a child's leg, someone swallowing too loudly.

And then Aaron moved.

Not a rush. Not a flinch. Just the smallest shift of weight, like someone deciding to stop pretending they haven't made a decision. His shoe found the edge of the gravel. He stepped onto the asphalt like he had stepped onto it a thousand times in his mind.

The figure did not turn to look at him. But something in him changed anyway—the tiniest acknowledgment, a fraction of a tilt, as if this had been the only part of the morning that required another person's acceptance.

My mother made a sound that wasn't a word. Her hands lifted, stopped, lifted again. She tried to move and couldn't. Her boots stayed planted on the damp grass as if the ground had taken a claim on her. The gloves on her fingers creased with the effort of wanting to grab what was already leaving.

My father did not touch her. He didn't call Aaron's name. His face tightened once—not with anger, not with surprise, but with the effort of not becoming someone else. He let out a slow breath through his nose, almost like relief, and it was the worst thing I'd ever heard him do, because it meant he had known.

The figure turned then—simply turned; the direction seemed to have been chosen long before he arrived. He began walking back the way he had come, unhurried.

For one heartbeat nothing happened. The town held itself still, waiting for permission to react. Then Aaron followed. His hands were loose at his sides. His shoulders stayed steady. He did not look left or right. He did not look back.

I kept waiting for him to turn. He didn't.

He followed at a distance that never closed. The space between them stayed constant no matter how long I watched. The light grew stronger behind them, slow at first, then brightening as the sun finally breached the horizon. Heat did not rise—the morning was cold—but the air above the asphalt shimmered anyway. The frames leaned forward like witnesses. Someone began to cry softly; someone else touched their

shoulder to stop it. No one stepped into the road.

At some point distance swallowed them. The shimmer swallowed them. The road ran straight and straight and then bent into brightness the way it does when you stare too long. Then there was only light where they had been. No one moved for a long time. The field stood complete—except for the space Aaron had left behind.

After a while people drifted back toward their structures. Hands found familiar tasks. The old reflex of labor returned like a prayer.

My mother stood in the road longer than anyone else. Her boots were on the asphalt, but she looked pinned there, her body the last stake marking a boundary she could not move. My father did not touch her. He stood beside his structure and watched the horizon the way he had in spring, listening.

Behind us, someone said softly, not triumphantly, not mournfully—simply placing the event into the language that had already been built for it: "He prepared." This time the words sounded different. Not like hope. Not like a promise. Like filing.

People couldn't agree on what they'd seen. Mrs. Halpern said he was too tall; Karl swore he was ordinary; the kind you'd lose in a crowd. The mayor insisted he never looked at anyone; my mother said he looked straight through us. Tomasz said his shoes made no sound; Mrs. Keller said she heard grit under every step. Some people claimed they'd seen nothing at all—only Aaron walking down the road alone. Only one detail held: the wrongness of the shadow, and the way the road seemed to make room.

The days after did not bring thunder. The sky did not split. The field did not transform. No further figures came down the road. Morning after morning the asphalt lay empty and ordinary, and that ordinariness felt like an accusation.

My father took that accusation personally. He woke before dawn anyway, went out without a coat, stood in the gap with his hands loose at his sides like he was waiting to be corrected. When he came back in, his cheeks were raw with cold and his expression had the tight, blank look like something had laughed at him. He never said *you can feel it* again.

There were different stories. The mayor said it had been an accident of heat and attention, the kind of mass foolishness towns fall into when the plant starts cutting shifts. Halpern said it was proof. The pastor said it was a test, and then stopped saying anything at all.

My mother didn't speak about it for a long time. When she finally did, she said only that Aaron had walked like he meant it.

After Aaron left, the project didn't continue. It didn't even end. It simply lost its reason.

For a week people still went out at dawn out of habit, standing among the frames with their hands in their pockets, waiting to feel something. Nothing came. The generators stayed off. The floodlights never returned. The field darkened at night like everything else, and in daylight it looked less like a beginning than a mistake left standing.

to the field anyway and checked joints or tightened bolts—not building, maintaining—as if maintenance could substitute for belief. By winter, boards began disappearing. Not stolen. Reassigned. A brace under a coat. A plank in a back seat. People stopped calling it readiness and started calling it waste. They said it in front of my father, and did not look at him. All summer they’d leaned in when he spoke. Now they moved around him the way you move around a piece of furniture you regret buying.

Many families left that winter. Others stayed because leaving required somewhere to go. We stayed.

My father stopped standing on the porch. He stopped watching the road. He sat at the kitchen table and paid bills without speaking. My mother moved around him with a careful patience that looked like mercy until you listened closely. When she spoke of the field she said *your structures*, not ours. *Your waiting*. Once she said, very quietly, “You promised it would mean something.” He didn’t look up. His mouth opened as if he might speak. Then he shut it again. After that they spoke mostly in logistics—milk, heat, the clinic schedule—each sentence shaped to avoid their sons’ names, one buried, one vanished down the road. They didn’t separate. They just hollowed out around each other.

In late spring my father walked into the field with a gas can. The wood had weathered dark; the lean looked less like devotion and more like exhaustion. He didn’t go to the tallest frame or the first. He went to the one that had cost him the most, as if burning it could erase the part of him that had believed. The fire took fast. People watched from the road and did not step into the grass. When it collapsed, my father stood in the ash and picked out nails with gloved hands, tapping them straight against a stone as if usefulness were the only purpose left.

Over the years the stories narrowed. That’s what stories do when people need excuses. They sand down the parts that sting, choose a version you can repeat without guilt, and call that truth. They said Aaron was taken because he wouldn’t build. They said it like a warning to children and a comfort to themselves. I nodded when they said it. I let them have it.

But alone, I remember how he stepped onto the asphalt—steady, almost relieved—and I keep a different story tucked where no one can reach it: that he went because he chose to, because staying would have meant folding himself into shapes that never fit, because the unknown was finally kinder than being seen as wrong. I tell myself that somewhere beyond the frames there’s a place that doesn’t ask you to prove you belong. I tell myself that’s where he is.

The road is still there all these years later. It runs straight beyond the frames, beyond the dead field, beyond what we could see even on the clearest mornings. Sometimes, when the heat rises in summer, distance bends and shimmers the way it did that morning, even when the air is cold.

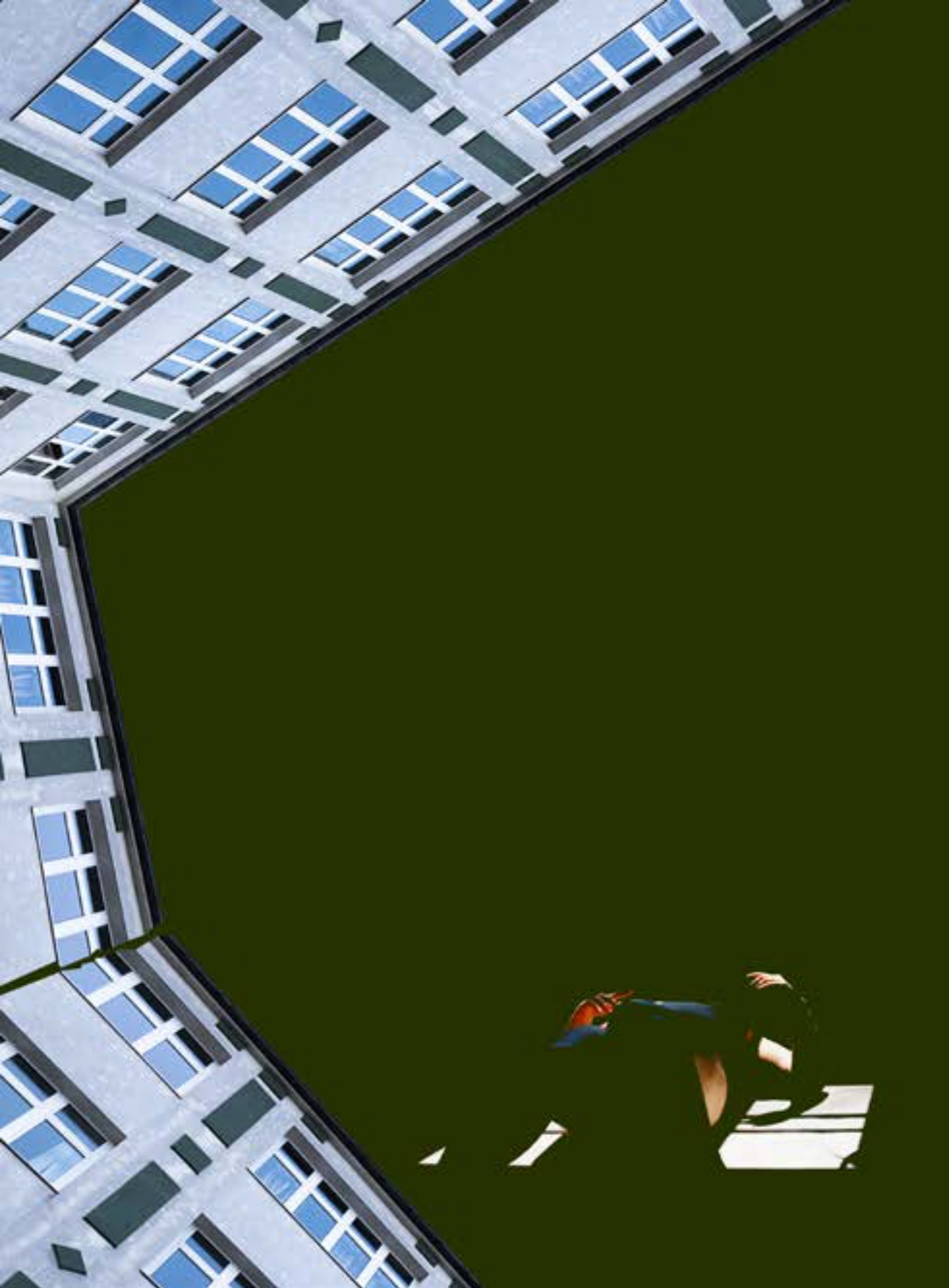
I stand on the porch where my father once stood and listen. I don’t know where my brother went. I know only that he did not build, and that he did not turn back.

Sometimes I think about walking too. It would not take much—just a step off the gravel, just the decision to follow the asphalt until the frames fall behind me. I have not tried. I don’t know where the road goes. I only know what it feels like to stay.

Some nights the wind moves through the empty beams and the field breathes like an animal asleep. I tell myself I’m waiting for him.

The truth is: I’m waiting for my own feet, and the moment they finally step off the gravel.





why can't you just **BE LIKE THE OTHERS?**

queer knowledge and the burden of seeing

MAIA GEORGE

Default belonging is often seamless, smooth. It lacks the friction that creates the necessity for questioning and critical, or even exploratory, self-perception. Loneliness, on the other hand, can be experienced in so many ways. I want to talk specifically about the loneliness of queer knowledge. The several subtypes it has. As a progression on the search for intersubjectivity and community; finding a different belonging, an earned one.

Why interweaving loneliness with knowledge? I like to think loneliness is a byproduct of self-awareness. Something queer people, and anyone who experiences exclusion, are often excruciatingly aware of. So it's about the intrusion of a form of knowledge that affects the self. A painful intrusion that recurs again and again, sometimes with a humiliating pattern that can be tracked.

A recent event lends itself to being taken as an example of the otherness in queerness in public discourse. It concerns a professor in a Texas university forced to drop texts from his class related to Gender Theory, Critical Race Theory and Plato. The reason given to him for this was the connection of these texts with —and I can only use this phrase with deep irony, as it's a doublespeak expression in my opinion— “gender ideology“. This situation has made me think of Plato and how he describes knowledge as a factor in human life. The effects it has on us. One of them being loneliness. For this, I'll work with *The Allegory of the Cave*.¹

1. The loneliness of having no words or language for your otherness

This one is about the nakedness of embodied otherness felt in your bones. An instinct for which you have no name, category, or concept. You just suspect something in you is different but you don't know what it is exactly. You don't have tools to figure it out, or questions to ask. It's a visceral, radically embodied state before words. All you have is a feeling inside of you. You don't trust it yet.

You only have the words that your upbringing and society have given you but they don't match your experience. Plato doesn't discuss queerness in The Allegory of the Cave, but he might as well have:

Plato: *"Here they live, from earliest childhood, with their legs and necks in chains, so that they have to stay where they are, looking only ahead of them, prevented by the chains from turning their heads."*

"All in all, then, what people in this situation would take for truth would be nothing more than the shadows of the manufactured objects."

Plato's words describe metaphorically what is given to most people through the dominant narratives of our societies. Hegemonic discourse. From earliest childhood, we are put in chains by the words and concepts most people use to describe what a good and normal life is supposed to look like. Cisheteronormativity as the shadows of manufactured objects. The freedom to find or be exposed to alternatives is not given. It must be fought for. Often driven by that naked, embodied knowledge without concepts that doesn't leave us alone. We don't know what we're looking for, but we know there must be something else out there.

2. The loneliness of having few people with whom you can talk about the discovered truth

At some point, by some stroke of luck, you discover there are words for your experience. Lesbian, Gay, Trans*, Bisexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/ Agender. You are not sure yet if you identify with those words, but what you found offers some hope: You can use them to compare with your experience. You feel less alone. If there are words, others have experienced this before. Even if it's the experience of not identifying with what everyone else around you seems to feel so comfortable in. The classic „I don't know what I am but I know I am not straight."

Still, a loneliness remains: Who do you talk to about this? Who could help you test your relationship with these words? Pure introspection is useful but sometimes misleading and painful. Queerness is about relationships; you need others to experience what queerness as relationship entails. How do you even find out who is willing and able to talk to you about this? Needing to use those words —not only internally, but with actual humans who could judge you— renders you, again, alone. There's a risk. Self-protection often implies isolation. Maybe you even ask yourself if this search is even worth it. Why can't you be like the others?

the concepts given at birth is lost irrevocably. And this loss is uncomfortable, stricken by denial:

"If he was forced to look at the light itself, wouldn't it hurt his eyes? Wouldn't he turn away, and run back to the things he could see? Wouldn't he think those things really were clearer than what was being pointed out?"

And further:

"Don't you think he'd be confused? Wouldn't he believe the things he saw before to be more true than what was being pointed out to him now?"

Your eyes hurt from a truth that you and others don't want as such. But there is no turning back. Once the chains have been broken; once you've started to move; once the search has started, the truth won't leave you alone. Who could run away with you? Or who could you run to? You don't know how to find that person or those people (yet).

3. The loneliness of wanting liberation for everyone

By now, you are further in your exploration. You had the courage to persevere in it without denying the naked truth inside your body. You have words for it, or good guesses, or approximations. Above all, you know that human relationships and gendered self-expression hold vast possibilities. You've also found a few people to talk to, who affirm your queerness without judgement. With some luck, even with love. You want everyone to take part in this richness.

But you've also observed carefully enough to notice how the world deals with the words of otherness, of queerness. They're not only there to help people find themselves and each other. They're politicized in destructive ways. You've learned, probably painfully, to expect violence in how they are used. So, speaking your truth and the truth of others becomes an act of greater courage than before. Not the courage of labeling yourself as an outsider, but the courage of potentially becoming the symbol of something people hate and want to destroy.

Plato: *"wouldn't he find this dragging painful? Wouldn't he resent it?"*

The loneliness here lies in wanting to share the truth with others, also for their liberation. You see a suffering that the victims of it don't see themselves. You're sure there are others who might want to break the chains. But you are met with violence because they don't want to let go of what they're used to. Now the loneliness consists

of knowing how much anger is directed at those people who carry the truth. You're a target.

Plato doesn't spare us here either. He knows that people react violently to being confronted with a world bigger than they thought:

"As for anyone who tried to set them free, and take them up there [to the light], if they could somehow get their hands on him and kill him, wouldn't they do just that?"

Plato even speaks of killing. He knows well what people are capable of to protect what has made sense to them so far. Potential liberation is not enough a reason to question what has given them structure, security and comfort. Without these things, life might just be too difficult to bear. But you, did you ever feel like you had a choice? Something in you has forced you down this path, not accepting repression. You never felt like you could choose comfort.

4. How do we get to belonging?

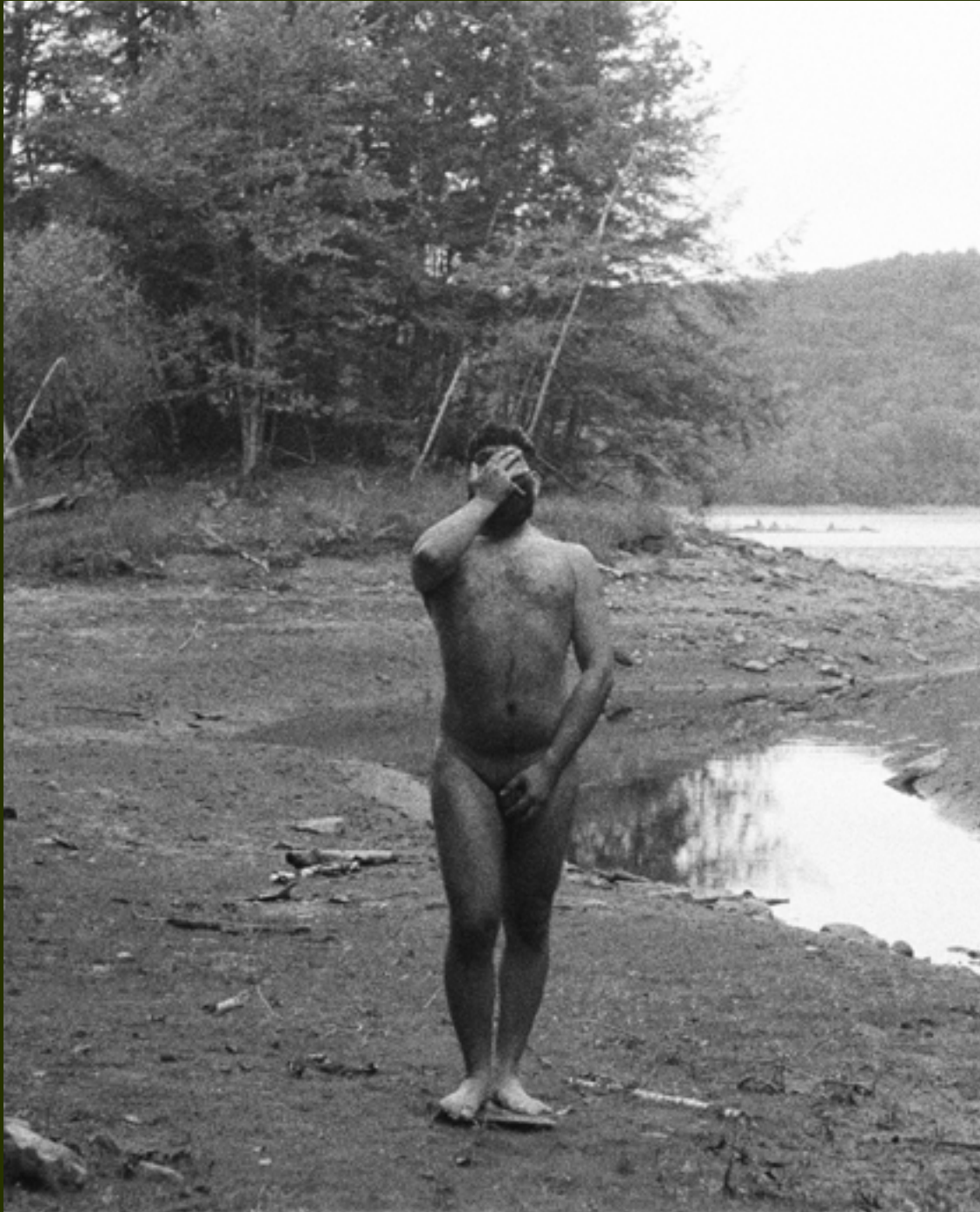
Here's where we return to Gender and Queer Studies. Why do we need them? Not just the you that feels pulled by an inner necessity of authenticity — all of us do. We need them as an alternative to the chains and the shadows of the cave. Queered vocabulary feels foreign, unusual and counterintuitive because it offers an alternative. It describes a different world with more possibilities than the cave let us believe we had.

As we saw with Plato, the task of liberation into truth is not trivial. It's an arduous process. Queer and Gender Studies give us the tools to analyze the contours of the cave, the functioning of the imprisonment, the reasons why some people want to remain there. But most importantly: Queer and Gender Studies show us the way into a light in which belonging is not tied to mere conformity. The truth is that queer people exist and will never cease to exist. Is there any belonging for anyone without accepting this and other truths about us all as humankind? Why can't we just be like the others? Because none of us was ever meant to be a specific way. What matters is how we turn toward each other in light of our respective truths:

Plato: *Well,' I said, 'if it's true, there's one conclusion we can't avoid, education is not what some people proclaim it to be. What they say, roughly speaking, is that they are able to put knowledge into souls where none was before. [...] [But] [t]he entire soul has to turn with it, away from what is coming to be, until it is able to bear the sight of what is, and in particular the brightest part of it. This is the part we call the good, isn't it?*



1. For this, I'm using Platos Republic, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari and translated by Tom Griffith. Cambridge University Press.



pie(r)ces
FRANCESCA SCHICCHERA

Once upon a time in the future, there was a caveman who didn't fit the time in which he lived. People from the future went to him and told him, "You don't belong here, please go back to the past."

The caveman replied, "Time travel doesn't exist yet, I can't go back to the past. That's the reason why I came to the future: to reach a time when time travel was already invented so I can travel back to my home and family."

The people from the future looked sadly at the caveman and seemed worried to speak more, but after some silence, a girl from the crowd of the people from the future was brave enough to stand up. Finally addressing the caveman, she said, "I am sorry, we are the most advanced culture that has ever existed in humankind, and no more advanced culture will ever exist. That's the reason why we finally proved that time travel is impossible, and you cannot travel back to your time. But we are happy to give you a new family and a new home, and you can live with us forever."

The caveman shed a tear, then said, "If I can't travel back, I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life. I will be happy for you to be my new family and for this to be my new home. Thank you for welcoming me among you."

But I—the person who is narrating this story—am a time traveler indeed, coming from an even further future than the future of the people from the future. This is why the story was told in the past. And in my time, we will learn to do even the impossible and invent time travel, and the caveman could have waited for the same further future I am from. I would have been able to let him travel back to his time. But he found something that was good enough for him, and he settled instead of continuing after his initial plan. He lived happily ever after anyway, and that's what matters most. So all's well that ends well and you don't need to feel sorry for the caveman.

Vernacular sounds of profanity and blasphemy are shouted in the main hall of the hospital. Me, the woman with the hood on her shoulders in winter, I am the mother of the disappointment and frustration of your righteous lives. When I wanted to die, in order to exercise power on how to not exercise power, you forced breathing back into me. You chained my body to probes and intraveins in the ICU room. You told me I don't own my life, my life owns me, and you own my life, so you own me. As if there's any other choice other than the choice to die or to die without choice. If being born is not the only inherent cause of death for everyone. And I'm alone against you, with all the infinite people like me who have been, are, and will ever be. I don't belong to you, because belonging implies a motherland, and a motherland implies borders, and I am alone together in the infinity of the people, and the infinite extends forever without borders.

You see, this is the library. It's like the collection of books on the shelves that we have at home, just bigger, and with a lot of strangers who come here to get books they don't have, so they can read them anyway.

Wow, I never imagined that such a place existed. So I can browse through the shelves, read the titles and the text on the back of the covers, and wonder which one of the many books I want to read.

Um, no, unfortunately it doesn't work that way. I said it's like the shelves we have at home, but actually you can't walk among them.

Wait, why? What did I do wrong that I can't walk among the books?

Oh, darling, you haven't done anything wrong. That's just not how it works here in the library. You see, all the books are filed. You go to the website of the library and search for the book you want to read. You send a librarian a request to retrieve it for you, and maybe already tomorrow you can come back, have the chosen book handed to you, so you can read it.

That's so silly. How can I know which book I want to read if I can't see what books are available? If I have to pick a title upfront, I will end up reading books I already know about. And what if the book I need to read—I don't know it yet?

This can be troubling, if you put it that way.

Can we free the books?

What do you mean?

Can we free the books from their files, and spread them among the people? I mean, all the people who have an urge to read a book—a book they don't know—and read it now, not “maybe already tomorrow,” in case their book of tomorrow is already another book.

That's not how things work in an organized society. It would be chaos if we let people have such access to books. If we let people roam freely and instinctively among books, they will end up reading the unexpected. This would tear humanity apart and doom everyone to a solipsistic reflection of their souls, through which they will be able to empathize and subjectivize with strangers opposite to them. But since they are strangers and opposite, only one outcome could be realized: you'll feel lonely, and you will end up reading more books all alone. And we need people brought together to build roads, so that stuff can be moved around. No, trust me, darling, it's better if books are kept confined this way.



the right temperature

JJ MAHAL

KitKat, 2024

The music on the dance floor pulsates.

Warm and insistent, like something you don't want politely.

Everyone moves as if to dance, but really they're ready for the camera that's not allowed to record.

My eyes meld with a guy, dyed blonde hair.

What starts as playful mimicry becomes tender touch, until I feel the sincerity on his lips

I feel the room shift.

Others are staring now. As if this is their show.

When did this earnest moment become their performance?

I turn back to him and see him hesitate.

I know this.

Best to leave him be.

A Queer Bar in Prenzlauer Berg, 2025

The lady with a bob checks her coat at the door and heads straight for the stage.

Her moves, a hypnotic focus. It's giving Metropolis.

Social living room filling up

The gays. Coming down from their weekend hall of mirrors

Two girls. In a lover's embrace next to me.

I'm flirting with two Belgian guys until they don't believe I'm American.

Meanwhile, the bartender's a friend, trying out new flavors.

He doesn't like the lime.

Danzigerstr., 2025

New haircut (not a bob). The Kurdish barbershop. A Romani woman sits on the street outside.

“Buonasera Signorina”

I give her my Spanish for her Italian.

She’s always got an ache to complain about and it’s never the right temperature.

I listen. That’s what she would like.

Not a favor, besides a coin or two.

Her eyes are hazel, like mine.

We’re two neighbors, sharing about our day.

A Queer Social Housing Project, New Years 2025

The master decorator’s really come through. An interior designer from Milan.

Turned this hasenstübchen into a cozy Ottoman-style seating area.

cheetah print walls, organza draping.

Dinner was at 9, DJs at 11.

One minute to midnight.

Everyone runs upstairs.

Rooftop views of fireworks near the Fernsehturm and church bell towers.

No railings, a long way down. No one plays daredevil.

Germans, love a stress test.

I wait for everyone to come down.

One last look.



(un)sent



Dear M,

It's my first night away, living in the big city. It is also my first time writing you a mail in. Ever? You would probably roll your eye at me, say to send you a text. But you know what? I really like the formatting I can do here. (Okay, no more of that, I promise.)

Funny because there are so many things I always wanted to tell you but never could when we lived under the same roof. Maybe this is unfair of me now, I am still your older brother, I should be a crutch to you, etc etc. Let me get you started on some details here though. Ease you in as they say.

The apartment qualifies as teeny tiny. If I want to turn in the kitchen I have to leave and do a turn in the living room, there is no way to do a full turn in there. You might actually but you are also barely tall enough to look over the counter. Or have you grown since you were eight years old? I did not notice but I'm sure this is an experiment we can conduct eventually.

It is also never quiet here. Then again, I guess it was never quiet at home, either. But the noises are different. Car horns are all encompassing and I am pretty sure the 5er train is driving straight through my bathroom approximately 14 times an hour. But it's peaceful, at least. No, the contradiction does not elude me.

How is home? Did you get my bedroom finally? I know you've been waiting for that since you were like ten. Sorry I was not able to move out at the tender age of fourteen and had the audacity to take an extra five years. Plus I am sure you will miss your twin the second you have to sleep in a different room from her. Let me know how that goes.

I like men. Sorry, that was jarring I'm sure. truth is, it is the first time I have put it in writing myself. Good thing you cannot see my hands shaking as I type this.

It is quite the scandal, I know, us coming from the middle of fucking nowhere and all that. I think you can see why I never told you this before. Or anyone else, for that matter. You have had enough to deal with, didn't need to add "sister of the town's fag" on top of it. I'm sorry, is that cruel? To myself? To you? I genuinely don't know but I am sorry nonetheless. I'm sure eventually I'll also figure out what for. I still wanted you to be the first to know.

That's all I really have to for you today. You can tell mom & dad for all I care. Maybe next time you bring home a bad grade. Might just even out the score, put some things into perspective. Or save it until Christmas to make dinner really interesting. Either way, I love you. I promise my next mail will be slightly less bombshelly. You may even learn a thing or two about what it is like to live in a place inhabited by more than 500 people. Spoiler: Grocery stores don't actually have to close at 5pm. Yes, I was just as shocked as you are right now.

Love you
E

M 8:15 PM: One missed call
E 9:56 PM: Arrived much later
than anticipated! Really tired now,
call you later! Xx
M 9:58 PM: kk

September 24 20XX

Darling dearest M,

it's not just grocery stores, it's the ... everything. There are more bars here than the zero we have got going for us back at home. If you don't count the disco that is technically still a barn. At any hour of the day I can go out and do something. The opportunities are quite literally endless, it is overwhelming in its own way.

And there are clubs I can go to now that are not forty-five minutes away. Or at least I can visit them without having to park my car at the edge of town and walk the last ten minutes home, just to make sure no one can see me drive back. You know how nosy the neighbors are. Not even mentioning our parents. It's a wild change in scenery, I think you would like it here. I belong here. I think. Perhaps you could too. You don't know this yet and you will shudder if I told you, but you remind me a lot of myself at your age. (I'm so sorry.)

But still, I wonder how much of my youth I have wasted. Looking back at it now, I was stuck in quicksand for longer than I can remember and there was no one there to pull me out. Is it mean of me to ask this of anyone when I can't exactly pretend that I asked for any help? Then again, it is not like I had the words to describe what was wrong in the first place, not for most of the years, anyway. It feels not dissimilar to drowning except you consider yourself still mostly fine. You get used to being stuck underwater. It still sucks though. Like a lot. Actually being able to not care what the neighbors will think? That's a lot of room left for breathing suddenly.

But it is certainly mean of me to expect anything from you now. You were a child throughout most of this, you had your own thing to deal with. You will always be my little sister. I love you. I'm sorry. This has really gone off the deep end. But I promise that not a minute I have spent with you has ever been wasted.

Damn, I am never going to actually send these, am I?
E

E 2:04 AM: bt drunkk rn! Call u l8er?
M 2:10 AM: sure. be safe.
E 2:11 AM: Will!! Love yu!!

October 18 20XX

Dear M,

have you ever felt not quite enough. Not in the "I have to practice more, study more, learn more" kind of way but as a person? Like you are not quite whole? Like everyone else has their identity fully figured out while you are barely half finished? Like you are less than anyone around you? (And they are all aware of it?) Everyone here has so much practice being themselves, they are so comfortable just existing and they do it so beautifully. And I just don't think I ever got that chance and now the moment has passed and I will never catch up. I guess I should view this less as a race and more as a marathon but sometimes that feels quite impossible.

I guess what I really am is jealous. Or maybe cheated. No one actually did me any wrong, I only have myself to blame, right? I just look at people who can be so unapologetically themselves and it hurts. Knowing that this is unfair of me does not make me feel any better by the way, thanks for asking.

Yes, I have kind of stopped pretending I will ever truly confess any of these things to you. Maybe we can sit together with a nice glass of wine one day (Do you like wine? And yes, I know that you have had a drink or two, you're not subtle my dear) and laugh about all this. For the sake of pretense, I will keep these safe until you have reached a drinking age. I still have to be some sort of role model.

E

E – Missed Call

E 1:02 PM: Ah crap, you're probably in class. That's fine, it's not dire. Try again later.
M 1:12 PM: Yeah, okay
M 6:33PM: Coward

November 20 20XX

Hey M,

I know you have never actually left home so maybe you are not the right person to ask this. Maybethe isn't actually a right person to ask at all. But despite everything you are still my closest confidant and ally (masterfully shown by me never actually sending you any of these, hah!)But I guess I am dawdling. In an e-mail. Funny me.

Have you ever thought about dying? Not really the act of it, I am not actively planning my demise, worry not. But the not existing any longer part of it. The aftermath, if you will. Who will find you? Who will mourn you? Who will show up at your funeral? Who will have any nice things to for your eulogy? And has your conclusion to all this ever been "not goddamn many?" Yeah, sorry. This is not actually something you want to hear about (And you won't! Genius me!) But writing these mails has long since become its own kind of dialog. How fucking lonely does that make me sound?

I would miss you if you died.
I hope you know that.

December 11 20XX

My deary M,

sorry that last one got really quite heavy for a bit there. I promise, this one will get more lighthearted. And I also promise that I am not always like this. Very rarely, actually. You know me, making you laugh is my job, after all. So, here's a funny story that you can most certainly tease me for in the years to come. As a little treat on top of all the drama from the previous mails.

I met a guy today. We have been kind of working together on the same assignment and let me tell you, he is an absolute prick. Like totally stuck up, major asshole. Unfortunately also really quite handsome. Someone you and I would make fun of if we had seen him on the bus. I'm pretty sure he irons his ties. I don't even own an iron. Or ties. And this man has an honest to god brief case that is filled with something that is not just granola bars? You get the type, I am sure. Now, none of this is painting him in a particularly good light, I know. But he is also smart and competent and rolls his eyes at most of my jokes, which I have figured out is his way to laugh. (You see why you can make fun of me for this?) It is really quite infuriating but I am five minutes away from doodling our names with little hearts around it.

Maybe you can meet him one day. ... Listen to me talk. We have barely exchanged phone numbers, spend most of the time sneering at each other and here I am, day-dreaming about introducing him to my family. Pathetic. But I guess most crushes are.

M 10:41 PM: I really need to talk to you

M 10:41 PM: Right now

M 10:42 PM: Please.

Call ended – 2:34 AM





Quinn

I'm writing to you from the end. I won't tell you what kind of end, for that remains to be seen. I'm writing you the story of Quinn and how he grew.

As a child, he was lithe and joyful. Days to him were bright and long. Each imbued with curiosities and newness. Now, looking back from the end, it's easy to see that these were his happiest moments and where he first found belonging. For everything he thought and felt was true. He lived a harmonious existence where each and every piece of his internal being was honoured and appreciated, explored and admired. Nothing was questioned. And so it was that he learned to belong first in his own mind. He found peace being exactly who he was. On some mornings, he would sing in the garden. The frosty grass of the morning would crackle under his feet as he danced to his tune. The earth squeezing between his toes as they dug into the cold earth beneath as he pirouetted and pranced around. On other mornings, he was content to lie in his warm bed and read peacefully, until his mother would get him up for school. And most importantly, on all days, he loved. Openly and unafraid. Sometimes so much that he thought that his heart might burst. He needed to convey the way he was feeling inside, with others on the outside. To anyone who would get in his affectionate way.

Unfortunately, when Quinn was softest, most tender and loving, the world was to teach him shame and fear. As he grew, it slowly taught him that thoughts too soft, expressions too vulnerable and not in line with expectations would often be met with pain. It could be physical pain yes, but he was more affected by emotional pain. Most were small instances of pain, rather innocuous. An awkward glance after a gesture of affection. Being told to cheer up, when he felt the world crumbling around him. A perplexed, concerned look after reaching out to hold the hand of his best friend. No single act was terrible, but each would grate across his heart, tearing at its soft surface and diminishing its strength.

As his strength began to falter, the world proffered him a bargain. It would take away the pain, but in return he would have to change, to be what the world expected him to be. He could no longer be tender and vulnerable. He could no longer love his thoughts and feelings, as they brought pain and suffering, and were of no use to the world. He would no longer dance and frolic in the garden. But nor would he collapse in despair, for he knew it was too much and not what the world wanted. Most importantly though, he wouldn't love openly and without fear. He would choose now to crush a hand that he would have, at some other time, rather held and nurtured in his own. Perhaps 'bargain' alone does not describe the arrangement. For a bargain alone implies agency. It implies that Quinn understood the terms of the agreement. But it wouldn't be until many years later that Quinn really learnt the terms of his bargain and saw it for what it was, a fool's bargain. And so, out of naivety and desperation, Quinn accepted. A world working in whispers and nudges fooled him into unknowingly selling his soul. His exquisite existence. It would have been better had the devil appeared in a great plume of smoke to bargain for his soul. For, even as a child, he would have known to refuse. Instead, he bargained with a hurtful, insidious world that he mistakenly assumed knew better than he.

Closer to the end, when Quinn did rescind the terms of his bargain. He re-awakened. His soul softened. Many lonely years passed before this moment. He was lucky that he found himself again, as many people don't. The conditions of their own bargains too enticing to let go. Or maybe, he would think at the end, they didn't have to give up quite as much as he. Not to say that Quinn didn't initially find comfort and less pain in his bargain. He found good friends, laughter and decent life. He trundled through the usual activities of people in the world. But as life continued, the bargain he had made weighed more heavily upon him. The vibrant, glowing world slowly dimmed and greyed and a thin veil fell across his eyes, leaving him separate from it. A world he wanted desperately to be a part of. He would think back to the feelings of his once vibrant childhood, hurt and confused that they had deserted him, spectral forms now cowering in the recesses of his mind. He did not understand, like I do at the end, that the terms of his bargain stole from him these feelings. It stole from him his exquisiteness, his ability to listen to himself and love his being. Because the world convinced him that to love his being meant pain and shame. Quinn tried to keep the fading glow alive by filling his life with many things. Projects to complete, accolades to collect, friends and places to see. It fended off the encroaching darkness for a while. But it wasn't enough.

His life became a passive, jumbled blur of events that were hollow and meaningless. That he neither liked nor disliked, but simply endured. His life became a sequence of choices that didn't feel his, because he had stopped listening to what he really wanted, what he really felt. He rarely decided where to eat because he was happy with anything. Not really happy. Happy to endure anything is really what he meant. He graduated top

of his class. Which helped to convince him that he had made the right choice. This passiveness bled into his relationships. He would rarely now reach out to hold someone's hand. The veil over his life lending interactions a surreal, disingenuous feeling. He would ask himself if he really meant it. If he really felt enough. But he questioned into a dark void. A void that would appear in his dreams as a vast black ocean. In these dreams he would hover over this ocean looking down on his worldly body slowly sinking into its dark waters. His body would gasp and claw at the air, grasping for something, anything, that would keep it from plunging to its black depths.

Even at his darkest, when the feelings of his childhood dimmed and receded to the quietest corners of his mind, they never disappeared. He vaguely remembered what it felt like to dance in the garden and feel the earth between his toes. The way the world glowed. And it was from these spectral memories that he was able to find his way back. He stubbornly refused to settle for the heavy blanket of grey that had enveloped his being. The blanket that caused him more pain than that which he had bargained with the world to protect him from. And in this realisation Quinn knew that he had been betrayed. That the bargain he had forged with the world so long ago, was false. For Quinn realised that without the glow and the laughter, the dancing and the loving, there was no world for him. And so for the first time in a long time, Quinn began to listen. Like he had in the beginning. He listened with curiosity and patience to thoughts and feelings long hidden. Emerging from their hideaways to reveal themselves as joyous beacons of light. Once again, not for the first time, Quinn began to change. It was a slow change as he wandered down the path of his life. A path on which he was lost many times. But in his wanderings he met many people. Some meandering by, others walking by his side who, when he was lost, would gaze toward some horizon he did not recognise and with raised arm and pointed finger beckon him on. Over time, Quinn would learn to love his thoughts and feelings again. He would learn to be proud of them, even. As he loved them now not through youthful ignorance, but by choice. And although along the path he met with pain and shame, he was not as afraid, because there were others walking with him now and the pain of not changing was much more burdensome. I like to think that it was more than a re-awakening. It was, in a sense, an end. Because he had never been this before. More whole and more himself than he was in the beginning. He had rescinded his bargain with the world and accepted that there may be pain. But in return, he had reclaimed his soul. He belonged again.



DES WASSERFALL

“Can you change my heart?”

The lost eyes of the Squire carried the kind of plea that knew desperately well that his request was foolish and impossible, and yet could do nothing to stop him from coming to the Mage’s tower, standing lone on the grey cliff above the indifferent sea. The Mage looked at him in silence, until the wind almost swept away the last shine of hope in the Squire’s eyes, before they finally answered, “Yes, I can. What is it that you seek to change about your heart?”

It took a while for the young man to actually hear their words through the resigned acceptance he had already embraced. But the wild, burning hope forced its way up his throat soon enough. “I cannot love,” the words burst out of the man, unbridled. “Not in the way that matters. Can you truly fix this, Mage?”

The wind danced around them and whispered the quiet challenge of fate that only the Mage could hear. “This is a serious accusation against your heart,” they said slowly, ignoring the wind.

“And I’m not making it lightly!” The Squire hastily stepped up the staircase leading to the tower, as if wanting to catch the Mage before they could leave and close the door. Not that they would, not after a request like this. “I tried, please believe me I tried! But something in me is missing, Mage. I know how people should love, I see it every day, yet I cannot understand! They love with something I don’t have.” The words seemed to stumble in his throat, and he swallowed, forcing himself to keep talking. “I tried... I tried to love her the way she deserved, the way she wished and waited for, but I... I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. She deserves the richest love the world can give, deserves to be loved like she’s a Princess and not a simple Handmaiden — but that love refuses to come from me, no matter how much I will it to!.. I can’t blame her for leaving me. She was right to do so, and I hope she finds the love she wants from someone else, but... But I wish my heart knew how to love too.”

The Mage could hear the pleading beat of the Squire’s tired heart through the protective cage of steel and bone. It was familiar, that plea. Familiar and old and aching. “Some hearts are not made to love maidens,” the Mage said carefully.

The Squire laughed, but it was not as laughter should be, too full of old bitterness and deeply rooted sadness. “I know, and I’ve tried that too! I have a friend; we’ve known each other longer than I’ve known myself. We came to the Royal Castle together, where I became the Squire and he became the Blacksmith. I cannot imagine my life without him — and yet I know I love him less than he loves me. He tries to pretend it doesn’t hurt him, but I know it does. I want to love him back, I *do*!.. But my heart is too broken for that.”

“It is not broken,” the Mage argued, even though they knew the young man would not listen. “Your heart is simply different.”

The Squire smiled humourlessly. “You’re not the first to tell me this. I believed that once. Liked the idea of that, even. An ugly duckling growing up to become a beautiful swan — what’s not to like about this?” He scoffed, his lips white from forcing the smile to stay on his face. “It’s a cruel hope to give to someone. Not everyone grows up to become a swan. Sometimes an ugly duckling just grows up to become an ugly duck.”

The Mage shook their head. “Beauty and ugliness are subjective,” they said, but they might as well have said nothing. “Some would consider this a blessing, to have a heart like yours. Life can be much easier without that needy love.”

“A *blessing*?” The Squire laughed with bitter disbelief. “How could anyone want to live like this — to never be enough, to never *give* enough, to watch and wait for people

to leave you for someone better, for someone *unbroken*? I'm not a fool, I know my Blacksmith friend will leave me one day too, no matter what he says now. I know one day, there will be no one left to leave me anymore. How can this be a blessing? How can this be anything other than a curse?!" The bitterness in his voice gave out with one last whimper, and any strength the man was still holding onto had died with it. "I'm... I'm *tired*, Mage. Can you help me? Can you fix my heart so that it knows how to love?"

The Mage could see in the Squire's eyes where the young man would go next if the Mage said no. He wouldn't go far, and the stones under the cliff were sharp — not that the Mage would ever allow the Squire to learn that. It didn't matter either way. The Squire was lucky to come here and not to someone else. "Yes," they nodded. "But it will cost you."

The Squire's sigh of relief joined the cold wind from the sea. "Of course! I understand how these things work, you don't have to explain them to me. Changing my heart would change me as well, the man that I am now will die, and I will become a different person — but this is exactly what I want, Mage. I'll pay this price happily."

The Mage smiled. "That was not what I meant, though what you said is certainly true. But it will cost you rubies as well, and quite a lot of them. It is not cheap magic to change one's heart."

This time, the Squire's laughter was real. "Ah, then! Would everything I own be enough?"

"I am a mage, not a thief. A bit less than everything will suffice."

The Mage led the man into the tower, knowing full well that all the rubies that the Squire or his Knight owned would not cover the crystals and herbs and sacrifices that magic of this sort required, but saying nothing of this. The Squire truly was lucky — not that he would ever fully understand that.

And three days later, the Mage led a different man out.

"You ask me to change your heart?"

The Witch laughed as if she had never heard the funniest joke in all her incomprehensibly long life, and her wild laughter echoed through the crooked trees and moss-covered stones of her forest, uncaring of the tears on the pleading face of the child, who would in time grow up to become the Mage.

"Is it impossible?" the child asked, confused by why she was laughing, still too young and too naive to know that a witch's laughter never meant anything good.

"No, of course not," the Witch scoffed. "Magic can do anything, child, and moulding a heart is no more difficult than moulding a universe!" She laughed again, and the starless night sky in her eyes laughed with her.

"Then you can do it? You can fix me?" The child wiped away their tears, hope raising its foolish head and making them step forward, forgetting for a moment that one should never come too close to a witch. "I'll do anything, I'll give you everything I own, everything I *will* own, just please—"

"This is a dangerous promise to give." All humour suddenly left the Witch. "You're lucky, child, for I am kind. I will not take it."

"But I don't own much, I know it won't be enough for your magic!" the child argued, too desperate to care about angering the dark forest that surrounded them in its shadows. "I'll steal from the kings, from the dragons, from the demons under the mountains, if this is what it costs!"

She shook her head. "I will not take it."

"Why?!"

The smile on her face was pitying and ugly. "You're lucky, child. Lucky that I'm the only one who could have done this, and lucky that I know better."

But the child did not believe themselves lucky. "*Please!*" they begged, the words tearing out of their throat, wet and desperate and foolishly hopeful still. "You say you're kind — so why do you refuse to help me?!"

"There is nothing to help with. You are not broken, because there is not a single thing in this universe that is broken. You are simply you, and I will not make you into anything more or anything less."

The child stared at her through helpless tears, and as the hope in their chest died, the only thing that remained was anger. "*Then you are a liar,*" they hissed through their teeth. "You're not kind, because you don't help people, not when it matters! And your stupid universe is just blind if it thinks there are no broken things!"

The Witch laughed, and this time the sound of it didn't carry into the forest but cut into the child's skin and eyes and lungs. "So, so lucky! Go now, child. *You will thank me later.*"

And so the child went, because what else was there left to do?

The anger that embraced them on that day carried the child through the years, holding them like a stubborn lifeline when everything else seemed broken and pointless and just out of reach. It led them to ancient textbooks and dark shadows and stars, and taught them to bend the universe and magic onto themselves and force them into the picture they desired. And through these years, and through this anger, the child, who had in time grown up to become the Mage, thought often about the Witch's parting words.

Would they indeed thank her for what she hadn't done?

They had long since understood why the Witch had said what she had said. The Mage would never have become who they were now if she had changed their heart like they had asked of her. And even though the Mage could change their heart themselves now, they had not done that either, because they had grown used to the person they had become.

And because there was simply no point in changing themselves anymore. The Mage had already lost everyone they could have lost. There was no life left for the person that the child could have become, if only they had had a normal, loving heart.

That person could have been happy. Could have built themselves a house, could

have found themselves a loving spouse, and would never have learned how to sing with shadows or dance with stars. But that person never got the chance to exist, because the Witch had decided it would be *kinder* this way.

The Mage's childish anger had been wrong — the universe wasn't stupid and it wasn't blind. No, of course not. The universe simply didn't care. Being broken was just as subjective as being ugly or beautiful — and the universe was too cold and too empty to know what those words even meant. But the Witch had been wrong too. She had refused to give the crying child a loving heart because she had believed the universe didn't intend them to have one — but the universe intended nothing, and wanted nothing. It didn't care about the Mage the child had grown up to become, or about the tower they had built out of sea winds and dreams, just as it wouldn't have cared if, in place of that tower, there had stood a simple house of birch wood and limestone, or if the child had never grown up at all. And there were many, many paths that the child hadn't taken where they indeed hadn't grown up.

And if the Witch were truly kind, as she had claimed, she would have helped the child who came to her through deadwoods and bogs carrying a desperate plea to choose the future with fewer paths on which they wouldn't grow up. But she hadn't.

So no.

No, the Mage would never thank the Witch.

"Was it a test, when you agreed to change my heart?"

The Squire was shivering from the cold wind breathing against his bones, and the stars seemed to be shivering together with him, hiding in the darkness above the indifferent sea, where the hesitant light coming from the open door of the Mage's tower could not reach them.

The Mage tilted their head. "What would it be a test for?"

"I... I don't know." The Squire's eyes were almost as lost as they had been several months ago, when he had come here for the first time. "Was it meant to teach me to love myself as I am?.. To show me that it's wrong and unnatural to want to change the very heart of my being?"

The Mage knew they should let the young man talk, but they couldn't stop themselves. They laughed, and the Squire stepped back as if hit by the sudden uproarious mirth that cut, uncaring, through the dying hour of the night. "*All magic is unnatural!*" the Mage pushed through their laughter, the words echoing in the dancing stars above the sea. "And it is never wrong to want to change yourself from the person you were born."

"So it was not... a test?" The Squire's voice was quiet, torn by what appeared to be equal parts hope and despair.

The Mage sighed, and dropped their smile. "No. You wanted to change your heart, and I have done as you asked. Do you regret that?"

The Squire looked away, and his fingers were white from how hard they were

digging into his palms. "My friends — the Knight I serve, the Blacksmith who always goes where I go, even my dear Handmaiden whom I begged to take me back — they all... they all thought I was cursed. Thought there was no other explanation for why I suddenly started to say and feel things that I'd never said or felt before. And they were so worried. They dragged me to the Healer, and when she couldn't see what they insisted was wrong, they wanted to drag me to you, Mage. I had to explain to them then what we had done. Explain that I wanted this. And they... they were *devastated*. They said I was a fool to do this, and that I should not have changed the man they knew and cared for."

The Mage listened, and even the ever-present sea wind quietened to stop the Squire's words from disappearing into the dark. "Did you come on their behalf, then?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." The Squire looked back, his eyes searching for something he couldn't name.

The Mage watched him, wondering what it might be that the Squire wanted to hear. They didn't usually care about giving soothing reassurances to people coming to their tower — a wrong place to seek such things, they believed — but this time, they found that they wanted to. "Your friends will learn to love you again with time," the Mage finally said. "And if not, then that love did not matter."

"Yes, exactly!" the Squire seized on this, almost desperate in his eagerness. "It's not like I became anyone less! I became someone *more*, because I got what I had been missing all this time! I can finally understand how they loved me, and how it was different from the way I loved them! And now I can love them that way too, the way that matters! Can't they see it's better? Why aren't they happy about this?!"

His agitated words echoed against the cliffs and ran along the whispering waves that carried them into the invisible horizon. The Mage said nothing, because they knew they didn't need to. And sure enough, the Squire's shoulders soon dropped again, losing their earlier conviction to the echo still ringing above the waves.

"But that's the problem, isn't it?" he continued, quieter. "I *understand* it now. I wanted to change my heart because I feared I wasn't enough for them — and it feels so silly now, when I understand their love better. They didn't care about this, they never did. They loved me anyway. Or, well... they loved the old me."

The Mage shook their head. "That was not the only reason you came to me."

The Squire's breath hitched, as if he had forgotten, or wished that the Mage had. He forced a familiar smile onto his face. "Yes, I suppose it wasn't," he whispered. He took a deep breath, and he wasn't looking at the Mage when he spoke next, trying to lose himself in the indifferent darkness instead. "I came because I believed myself broken. An ugly duckling, too lacking to ever grow up into anything proper. And no matter how afraid I was to come to your tower, to even think about something as unnatural as changing my heart — it was still better than remaining who I was." He fell silent, dropping the smile he had put on for no one's sake but his own. "I got what I wanted. I'm not the man I was before, and now I find that I... I... *I miss him.*"

The confession escaped his lips in a single breath, and he looked shocked to hear it, as if it hadn't come from him. But the longer the words lingered on his tongue, the further the hesitance slipped from his face.

"Yes," he repeated as he finally met the Mage's eyes again, and for the first time that night, his voice was steady. "Yes, I miss him."

Ah. So it was not for reassurances that the Squire had come, after all. "Why?" the Mage didn't care to hide the surprise from their voice.

The Squire didn't answer immediately, trying and failing to find the words, as if he didn't quite know the answer himself yet. "I... I used to like carving wood, you know?" he finally said. "I wasn't good at it, but it didn't matter to me. And now... I haven't touched the tools once since you changed me. I'm not even sure I remember where the carving knife is. I thought about finding it, but... I simply don't have space in my head for this anymore. That space is taken by different desires now. I tell myself it'll get better with time — but it's been months, and it hasn't."

"Your heart had changed," the Mage nodded slowly. "It feels for different things now."

"And it feels *so much!*" The words burst out of the Squire, and he looked as if he hadn't even known he was trying to contain them. "I didn't realise before just how much I was missing, and I didn't... I didn't know how *tiring* it would be! There are so many feelings, and they never go away, and it's so hard to think about anything else but... but my *friends*, and my *love*, and my *need* to do something with it, and it's exhausting and I don't like it and I don't understand how people even live like this! How do they handle it?! All these feelings, all the time?! *How?!*"

The Squire looked at the Mage as if he genuinely expected an explanation, needed and hoped for it, and the Mage had no choice but to tell the truth. "I am not someone who knows the answer to this question," they shook their head, and found themselves feeling almost apologetic. "But my understanding is that you will grow used to it with time. Like everyone does."

The silence stretched, broken only by the shy wind softly rustling their clothes, and by the waves beating against the stones to a rhythm only they could hear. The Squire's eyes were wide with recognition that he never expected to find, and when he finally spoke again, it was barely above a whisper. "Is this why you agreed to change my heart? Because you... you knew—"

"I did it because you asked me to," the Mage stopped him, because whatever else the reasons might have been, this night was not about them. The Squire had come here for a reason, and the Mage would not do him a disservice by letting him forget about it.

The Squire kept watching them for several long, meaningless seconds, and he seemed to understand. He closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them again, they carried a conviction that settled comfortably and firmly in him. "You asked me if I regretted it. I don't. How could I, when I got to love my friends? I know they disagree, but they *deserve* to be loved properly, and I'm... I'm happy, I *am*, that I was able to give them

that. But I also understand why they worry for the man they knew before, why they miss him — because I miss him too. Yes, he didn't know love — but what does it matter? So many people already know it — and so few are ready to spend hours whittling a stupid little snail! And isn't that more interesting? Wasn't the world a richer place with *him* in it, not *me*?" He stepped closer then, his next words so quiet as if he didn't dare let them be heard at all. "The way the world is richer with a *mage*?"

The stars watched them both with their thousand flickering eyes, deceptive in their unseeing light, too far away across the vast and empty universe to ever bring warmth. "The world does not care," the Mage said, gentle in the way the world was not.

The Squire frowned, and the conviction in his eyes turned stubborn. "But I do."

The first brushstrokes of sunrise began to etch themselves into the night void, effortlessly swallowing the dim shine of stars that stood no chance against the overwhelming brightness, no matter how grand and beautiful and full of purpose beyond human understanding they had been. New winds came running from beyond the waves, caressing the skin of the Mage and the Squire with playful warmth.

"I can change your heart back, if you want," the Mage finally answered the question that the Squire was too afraid to ask. "You do not have to make the decision now. It will be harder to do as more time passes, but not impossible."

The Squire's shoulders dropped in relief, releasing the tension that had still been foolishly holding him. "How much would it cost me? If I do choose to change it back."

More than he would ever be able to pay. "Nothing. But if you change your mind again after that, I will ask for more than I did last time."

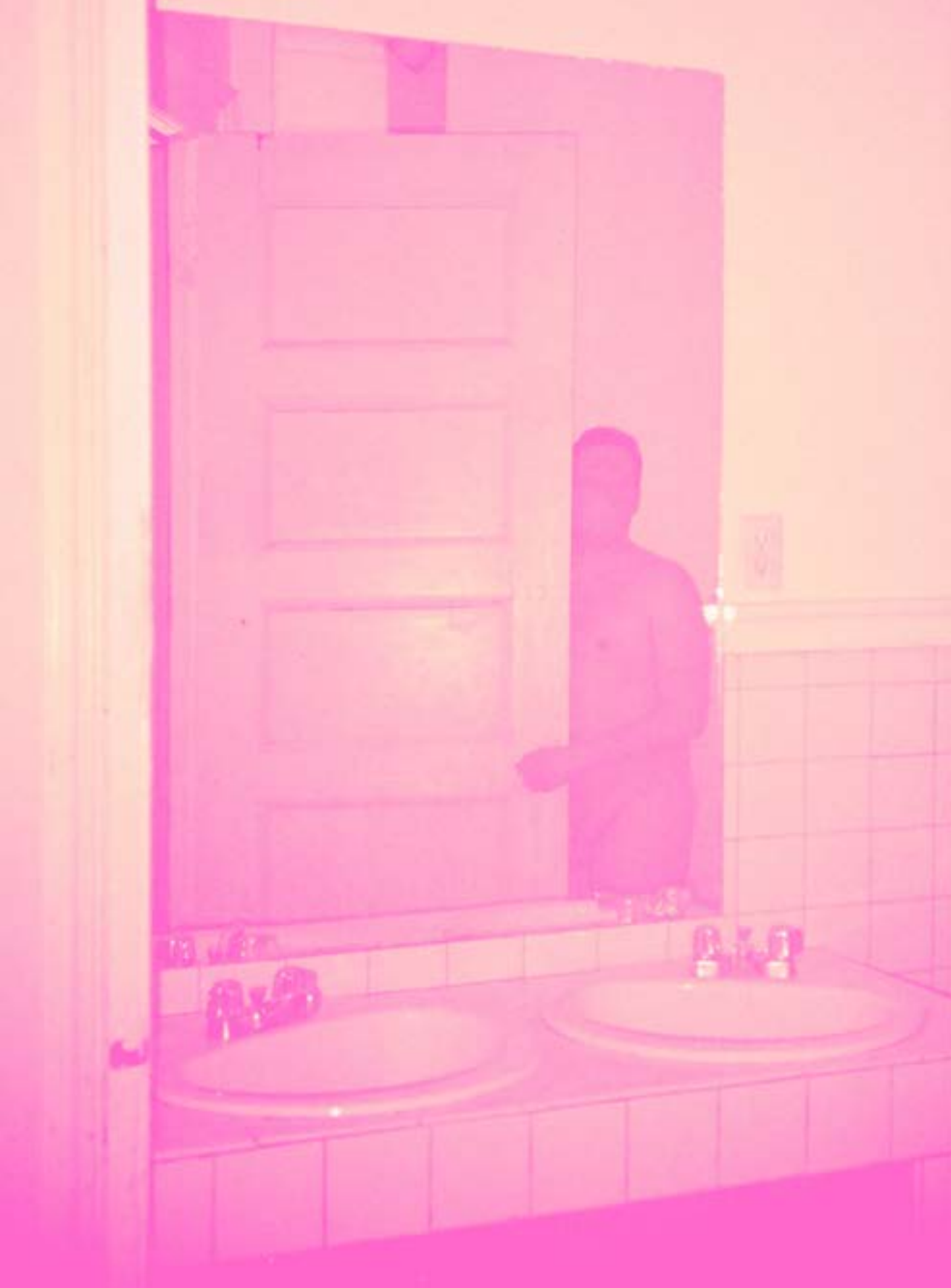
The Squire laughed, and it carried free and light into the waking morning. "Of course! It would be the least I deserve." He shook his head, and then his smile grew quieter. "Thank you, Mage. For being kind."

The Mage, who was already turning away, paused. Then, without another word, they stepped back into their tower, leaving the door open.

It would be an interesting challenge, to prepare a new ritual. The previous one had been simpler in this regard, as the Mage had already spent years slowly planning it in the background of their thoughts. It hadn't taken long at all to finalise the design after that. But the new ritual — oh, the new ritual was a different story entirely! How quickly could the Mage figure it out, starting from nothing, if they really focused on it? It had been a while since they had worked on something quite as daring as this, and the Mage found themselves looking forward to when they would be able to start — even if they might end up never using this new ritual at all.

But it could wait.

Because right now, as hesitant steps followed them across the tower staircase and through the open door, they needed to put on a kettle.



trajectory of a snake waltz

I always find it very hard to understand a 'question'.
Since I don't understand the question, I can't answer.
Since I can't answer the question, I should make a question back.
But I can't make a question.
Because I don't understand the question.
Because I don't know what I didn't understand.
So I couldn't answer the question.
So I couldn't understand the question...
A dilemma cycling as Ourobos.
As a piece of paper glued end-to-end.
The beginning and the end disappear, and the paper becomes to be easily crumpled.
I rotate the cylinder slowly and carefully, hoping it remains intact forever.
But the paper gets wrinkled in my sweaty palms, my sloppy fingers.
Should I hand it over to other's hands before I make it become more wrinkled?
Or if I wish I could hand it over?
Or should I just crush it completely?
Just to taste the ecstasy of destruction before it's too late.
Beneath the skin, smouldering cells prickle and itch.
A craving for nothing.
I rotate the cylinder ceaselessly, the creases deepen.
That's where the time rears its face as a devil.
With every turn, The face sharpens.
"Who's this?"
The silent remains, the question leaves the room.
There's just me and the face.
My heart start's pounding.
Kafka once told me that we are beings who cannot tell fear from love.
Fight or flight?
What if,
what if,
what if...
My hands rotate the paper faster and faster, yet the face lingers.
There are no words, there's no emotion.
This is not an expression.
This is the mere shifting of a hide.
A land communication has never found.
I dissolve into the hospitality of meaninglessness.
Beginning, end, and memory crumble.
I cut the paper, tracing the face.
But it shifts erratically, leaving tattered shreds in my hand...
Now it's still, it has taken form.
I cast a light upon the shabby traces to bestow a kiss.
And... "Holy shit that's me!"
Narcissus said.

new normal

As I decided to be a plank of wood
waiting for the moment to be crumbled into pieces
As a wind slicing through the swift trail
surrender to the spin of the Earth
As a train bound for nowhere cuts through sticky wilderness
where flesh and blood decay
Each tremble scattering spreads outward like a reed wave

Now I still a plank of wood
Waiting for new form of body
Waiting to smudge in every cracks
Waiting to be embraced without notice
The Earth has no axis nowhere a record a path
an absorbed observation

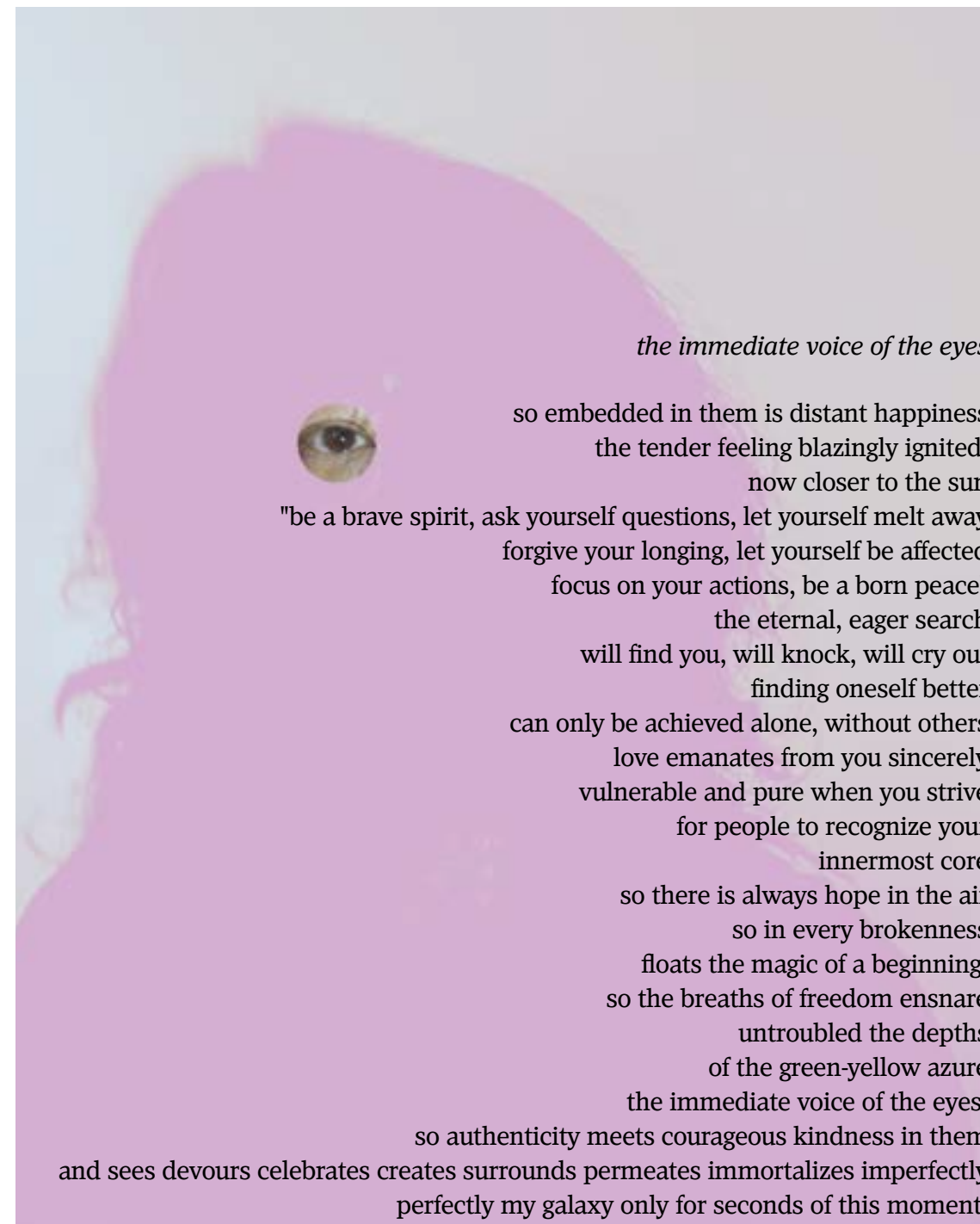
Only be engraved
to be standstill as death: still, halt, unconscious, suspense, the end, abandon, stubborn, fixed,
the vertex of extreme, separation, loss of life, the sound of the last exhale 'sss...'
to be waiting and carry on
to be humiliated
to be a sadist in the form of a masochist
to be a hallucinating machine
to bless eachother with golden glitter that stinks my eyes

Where's my body?
There's plastic in my brain



die unmittelbare stimme der augen

so liegt eingebettet in ihnen das entfernte glück
das zarte gefühl lodernd entfacht;
nun näher an der sonne sein.
„sei ein tapferer geist, stell dir fragen, lass dich zerfließen
vergebe deiner sehnsucht, lass dich wirken
stell dein handeln ins visier, sei ein geborener frieden“
das ewig, eifernde suchen
wird dich finden, wird klopfen, schreien
das sich selbst besser finden
gelingt nur allein ohne andereaus dir wirkt liebe aufrichtig
verletzlich und pur wenn du anstrebst
dass menschen deinen
innersten kern erkennen
so liegt stets hoffnung in der luft
so schwebt in jeder zerbrochenheit
die magie eines anfangs.
so umgarnen die atemzüge der freiheit
unerschrocken die tiefen
des grüngelben azurs
der unmittelbaren stimme der augen;
so trifft in ihnen echtheit auf mutige güte
und erblickt verschlingt zelebriert kreierte umringt durchzieht verewigt unvollkommen
vollkommen meine galaxie nur durch sekunden dieses augenblicks.



the immediate voice of the eyes

so embedded in them is distant happiness
the tender feeling blazingly ignited;
now closer to the sun
"be a brave spirit, ask yourself questions, let yourself melt away
forgive your longing, let yourself be affected
focus on your actions, be a born peace"
the eternal, eager search
will find you, will knock, will cry out
finding oneself better
can only be achieved alone, without others
love emanates from you sincerely
vulnerable and pure when you strive
for people to recognize your
innermost core
so there is always hope in the air
so in every brokenness
floats the magic of a beginning.
so the breaths of freedom ensnare
untroubled the depths
of the green-yellow azure
the immediate voice of the eyes;
so authenticity meets courageous kindness in them
and sees devours celebrates creates surrounds permeates immortalizes imperfectly
perfectly my galaxy only for seconds of this moment.

inmitten des neBELs

wie der nebel den docht der kerze berührt
finden die schatten ihren platz in der spiegelung des dunkelblauen wassers
wie die apathischen äste
schreiend schwiegen
liegt jene stürmische brise des winters
in den vergangenEN wellen der vergebung
träne um träne, lasse ich wie der winter meine blätter fallen
das lächeln der vergangenheit verblasst langsam im düsterhellen nebelschein
vermisst du das licht,
dass alle poren zum atmen bringt?
wie sehr das sehnen innere disziplin ist
als wäre das licht in andere signaturen schwebend zerlaufen
als wäre liebe erloschen und doch skizzierend präsent
wie ein baum ohne wipfel
spürst du die wurzeln, dort wo der nebel wandert
der nebel verzerrt auch das tiefste licht
wird alles anders sein, wenn der nebel schwindet oder lässt der nebel mich für immer
verschwinden?

Eins sein im allein sein

Allein sein kreiERT
manchmal die
verschleierte paradoxie
des eins seins
das zuhören von gedanklichen lügen
ohne ihnen beachtung zu schenken
ist erneuerung im allein sein
jener strom des verlassenensein
verändert im inneren reisen das fremdsein
das lichtvolle loslassen von sinn birgt erlebte erleichterung
wärmendes wohlgefühl im allein sein
versprüht stärke in zuversicht
wir sind, wenn wir allein sind stets mit uns selbst, wann verlassen wir uns selbst in
der einsamkeit?
in schlaflosen nächten
in einsamkeit zerfließend liebend
wie ein ganzer ozean
aus glühenden molekülen, die fühlende bindung zu allem in einsamkeit aus
selbstgefühl finden

in the midst of the fog

as the fog touches the wick of the candle
the shadows find their place in the reflection of the dark blue water
like the apathetic branches
screaming in silence
lies that stormy breeze of winter
in the past waves of forgiveness
tear by tear, like winter I let my leaves fall
the smile of the past slowly fades in the gloomy glow of the fog
do you miss the light
that makes all pores breathe?
how much longing is inner discipline
as if the light had melted away into other signatures
as if love had died out and yet remained sketchily present
like a tree without a crown
you feel the roots, where the fog wanders
the fog distorts even the deepest light
will everything be different when the fog disappears or will the fog make me disappear
forever?

Being one while being alone

Being alone sometimes creates
the veiled paradox
of being one
Listening to mental lies
without paying attention to them
is renewal in solitude
That stream of abandonment
changes the feeling of being a stranger in inner journeys
the luminous letting go of meaning brings experienced relief
warming well-being in being alone
radiates strength in confidence
we are, when we are alone, always with ourselves, when do we abandon ourselves in
loneliness?
in sleepless nights
melting into loneliness loving
like an entire ocean
of glowing molecules, finding the feeling connection to everything in loneliness out of
self feeling

die zugehörigkeit des ichs

- zur gegenwärtigen minute
entgegen eurer jetzigen atemzügen -

sie soll leben
meine wortkreation
wie ein in
azur getupfter saphir
auf meines
zerlebt, verknittertem
beigemelierten
schreibpapiers

wer?
ich
berlin
pulsiert
schon sehr;
vornehmlich
ohne manie
eine wahrlich
sprudelnde rotsüße
harmonieszenerie

ich
primär verkehrt
selbstkritisch verwundet
erkundend umschlungen
fast zu sehr
an innerer unabhängigkeit
gebunden

mit mir
bist visier,
ein egoistisches elixier
und aus neugier
radier'
ich das rostende
angstschanier
gänzlich

aus der tür der trüben
sehnsuchts gier
wüst und wirr
ist plötzlich
für sekunden verstummt:
mein loderndes gefühlsklavier

mein naturell
explizit
optimistisch liebend

und
windend;
scheint nie restlos schwindend:
pochend
das rissig, vergangene sein
einer hingebenden
sinfonie aus nostalgie
in sympathie
führe ich
geschickt wie je
fortan
hochgefühlsregie

der verfall meiner gegenwart
begründet
vergänglichkeit
so
umwebt, fundiert
vergänglichkeit
unumgänglich
meine erschaffenheit
türmen sich
narbige stürme
von
treibender unbändigkeit
aus der
allgegenwärtig
achtsam bemerkten
dreckig rasenden flüchtigkeit
meiner
zeitlichkeit

mein wunsch
ist
ein konstrukt aus glück

und erhabenheit
lässt
der ungewisse zukunftsfall
kaum raum
für andauernde gelassenheit;
in unserer gesellschaft
können wir gefesselt
in unserer kreativität frei
wirklich alles sein
ob
elegant tänzelnd
ob
fein
gemein
still trabend
heimlich dabei
die seele verlierend
in illusionen des seins

die güte zu sich selbst
verdreht, vertraut, entzwei
denn dann
von niemandem erhört
ein giftig, flatternder schrei
steht meine unbetagte staffelei
des lebens
in keiner schuld
in akkurat
selbstwissender zukunftszauberei
ich verkrafte wirklich jegliche
gesellschaftliche prügelei
wenn dafür bleibt
mein erfrischend, salbeizartes,
wahrhaft ungeschicktes sein
in erblühend echter,
hell präsenter
identitätsmalerei

ein klar konstanteres sein
doch auch kaum fehlerfrei

sprach mein kopf einst harsch gravierend:
"sei kein triefender papagei
aus plumpheit oder angepasstheit
eine im hamsterrad endende
strampelnde lustlosigkeit
denn
wächst du nur entgegen des strichs
mit äußerst gütig
ergebenden ausdruck
deines jungen gesichts"
so
ist mein ich
anhänglich, überschwänglich
endlich, unerdenklich
spreche ich
im monument des augenblicks
zart schüchtern, fast flüsternd
an mich allein
und
somit ist jede silbe
an das
facettenreich, unbeholfene
sein
gerichtet

in hochachtung,
doch in unkenntnis
bremsendes urverständnis
zerfließen
in letzter
verwurzelter leichtigkeit
unentwegt
die farben aus schrift
ehrlich, unverderblich
für dich
liebes ich

the belonging of the self

- to the present moment
contrary to your current breaths -

it should live
my word creation
like a sapphire
dotted with azure
on my
worn, crumpled
beige-flecked
writing paper

who?
I
berlin
already pulsates
very much;
primarily
without mania
a truly
bubbling red sweetness
harmonious scene

I
primarily reversed
self-critically wounded
exploring entwined
almost too much
bound to inner independence

with myself
you are a visor,
a selfish elixir
and out of curiosity
I erase
the rusting
hinge of fear
completely
from the door of the gloomy

longing greed
desolate and confused
is suddenly
silenced for seconds:
my blazing piano of emotions

my nature
explicitly
optimistic loving

and
winding;
never seems to disappear completely:
pounding
the cracked, past being
of a devoted
symphony of nostalgia

in sympathy
I lead
skillfully as ever
from now on
the direction of elation

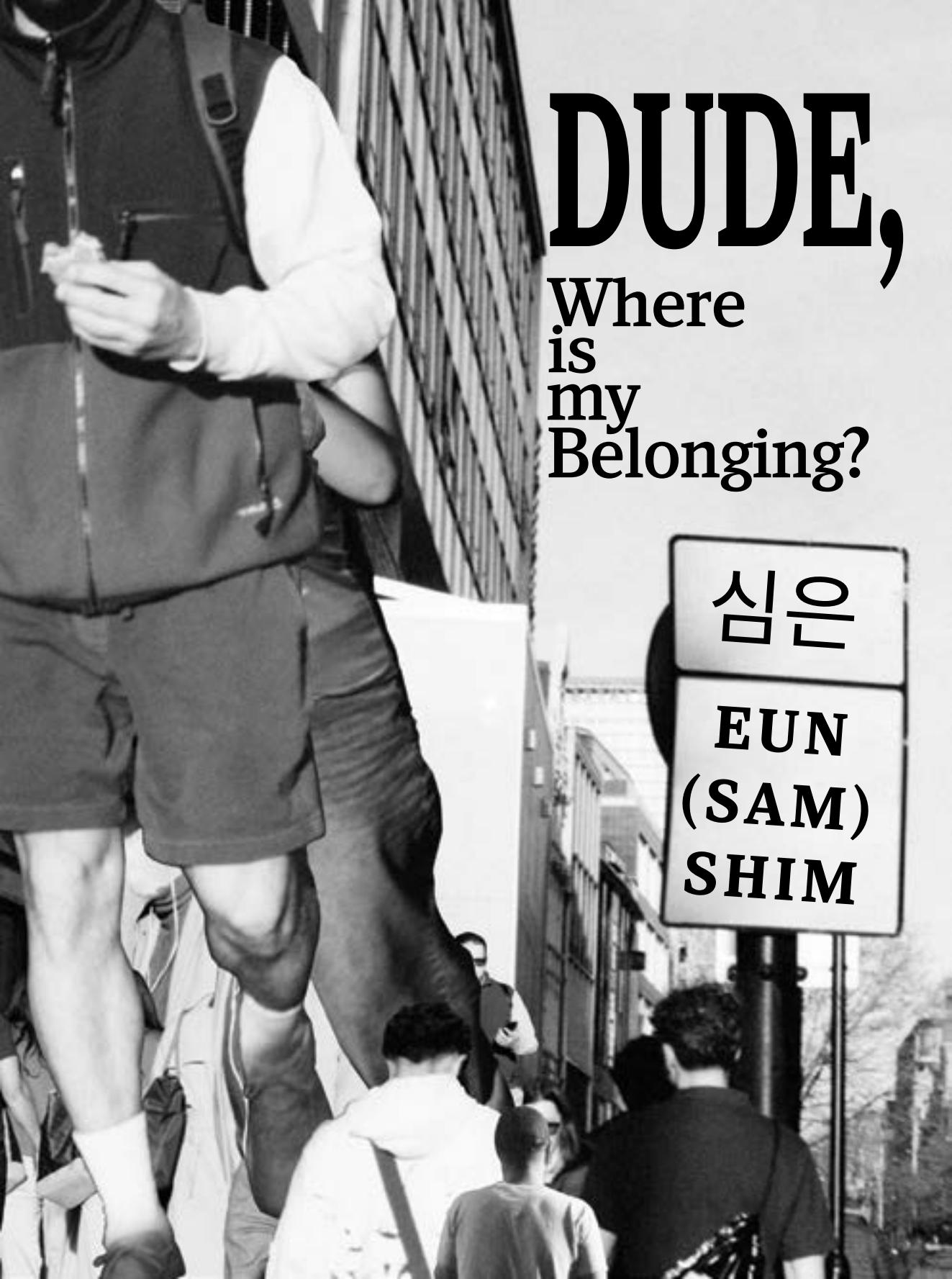
the decay of my present
founded
transience
so
interwoven, grounded
transience
inevitable
my creation
pile up
scarred storms
of
driving unbridledness
from the
ubiquitous
mindfully noticed
dirty raging transience
of my
temporality

my wish
is
a construct of happiness

and sublimity
leaves
the uncertain future
hardly any room
for lasting serenity;
in our society
we can be bound
but
in our creativity free
truly be anything
whether really be everything

whether
elegantly dancing
whether
finely
mean
silently trotting
secretly
losing one's soul
in illusions of being
kindness to oneself
twisted, familiar, torn apart
because then
heard by no one
a poisonous, fluttering cry
stands my ageless easel
of life
in no fault
in accurate
self-aware future magic
I can really cope with any social beating
if in return
my refreshing, sage-tender,
truly clumsy being remains

in blossoming genuine,
brightly present
identity painting
a clearly more constant being
but also hardly flawless
my head once spoke harshly and gravely:
“don't be a dripping parrot
out of clumsiness or conformity
a flailing listlessness ending
in the hamster wheel
because
you only grow against the grain
with the extremely kind
surrendering expression
of your young face”
so
is my self
affectionate, exuberant
finally, unthinkable
I speak
in the monument of the moment
tenderly shy, almost whispering
to myself alone
and
thus every syllable
is directed
at the
faceted, awkward
with respect,
yet in ignorance
of the primal understanding that holds it
back
melting away
in the last
rooted lightness
steadfastly
the colors from writing
honest, imperishable
for you
dear I



DUDE,

Where
is
my
Belonging?

심은
EUN
(SAM)
SHIM



“I wanna heal, I wanna feel like I’m close to something real. I wanna find something I’ve wanted all along... Somewhere I belong.”¹ would be one of the many songs that my teenage self would be singing angsty to herself, convinced that she is the loneliest person to have ever existed in the history of mankind. “No one understands me.” “I don’t belong anywhere.” “No one knows this pain.” At that time I was a 12-year-old Korean kid, going through puberty in a small town called Wivenhoe in Essex after having lived my entire life in Seoul², a 605.21 km² city of 10.4 million people.³ I like to joke that the shite English weather is what gave me clinical depression that made me suicidal for the next 10 years, but the truth is it probably had much more to do with genetics and my upbringing.

It was only later on that I realized many, in fact, have experienced the type of existential crisis and suicidal depression that I had gone through. Maybe not at the same age, and perhaps to a differing degree, but my experience was far from unique. I think that's why when I think about the idea of belonging there's this sort of reflexive cringe that I feel, because to me, wanting to belong and feeling sad about not belonging will always remind me of my teenage self. And in order to disavow the part of myself that I still feel somewhat ashamed of, I disavow the idea of wanting to belong. *Ew, you want to find "somewhere you belong"? That's like, so embarrassing.*

This is not to downplay the very real consequences of being ostracized in society for being different, whether it be because of your gender, race, religion, class, disability, sexuality, and so on and so forth. Cambridge dictionary defines belonging as "a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you."⁴ The first example for this word is: "A sense of belonging is one of humanity's most basic needs." Of course that's true. Humans are social animals. Feeling like you're part of a group that welcomes and accepts you has a massive impact on your well-being. Individuals who feel like they truly don't belong anywhere and are ostracized by society in general often cause harm to themselves (suicide) or others (school shooters, for example).

But putting the truism that we all need some sense of belonging to survive aside for a second, there is a part of me that wants to figure out what the hell this "belonging" is. What do we mean when we say "belonging"? Is "finding somewhere I belong" something we've "wanted all along"? If it is, is it healthy for us to want that? What are the implications of that desire? These are complex questions. So, instead of trying to come up with a definitive, singular answer, this essay will delve into the different – and often contradictory – aspects of belonging, by way of a series of vignettes.

Belonging as: a boundary

Note that in the Cambridge dictionary's definition of belonging, it's vital that the group that you are a part of "welcome[s] and accept[s] you." That's why you feel "happy or comfortable" as part of that group. Then, by definition, belonging relies on external validation. That's why as much as belonging can be about that feeling of happiness or comfort, it can also be tied to the issue of holding a boundary – are you in or are you out?

I was born and raised in Seoul. Korean is my mother tongue. I am a Korean national, or as I often find myself saying, "Korean Korean." But I get mistaken as a Korean American a lot. I think even more so now because I've picked up a very Californian accent after living in LA for about 3 years, but I was mistaken for a Korean American long before I ever set foot in America. I remember this one instance vividly from when I was in middle school, so probably about 14. I walked into a hair salon, said "안녕하세요 [Hello]," sat down. The middle-aged hairdresser lady

glanced at me through the mirror while putting the salon cape on me, then asked:

"교포예요?"

Are you a gyopo?

As Min Hyong Song explains in *Strange Future*, *gyopo* is "a Korean term used to refer to overseas ethnic Koreans."⁵ Song writes that this term "usually has a descriptive valence, but is also tinged with the secondary meaning of Koreans who in traveling away from their home country have lost touch with their roots and have in some way become inferior replicas of an original self." The Sino-Korean etymology of the word *gyopo* also supports Song's statement. The first syllable "교 [gyo, 僑]" means "to sojourn, to temporarily live somewhere," and it's used in words such as "교중 [gyojung]" (while being far away from home) and "교우 [gyowool]" (to live temporarily at another person's house or at a place far away from home)." The second syllable "포 [po, 胞]" means "cell." *Gyopo* is a *cell* that's *temporarily* living elsewhere, away from *home*, cut off from the main organism. *Gyopo* refers to all overseas ethnic Koreans, but it's often used to refer to Korean Americans in Korea, as they are the biggest group of the Korean diaspora.

So at that moment in the hair salon, it felt like the hairdresser was saying: *I know you're not 100% Korean. Explain yourself.* I don't remember if I did explain myself then. I could either have said "아니요. 저 한국사람이에요 [No. I'm Korean]." or I may have told her that I did live in England for a year and a half. If it was the latter, it would probably have been met with "아, 그럼 그렇지! [Oh, I knew it!]" a confirmation of her suspicion that I had that tinge of that non-Koreanness. For years after that, and even still, I think about that interaction. I've wondered what it was about me that signalled to her that I wasn't from there, that I did not belong there. Did I pronounce 안녕하세요 [Hello] wrong? Was there something in the inflection of my speech that signalled foreignness? Was it the way I walked in, the way I sat down? I asked around if my Korean pronunciation was off, and I was told that it's not. It can't have been the way I dressed or the way I looked, because I was wearing a school uniform. What was it about my being that told her I'm not "one of us"? *What was I doing wrong?*

"I mean, because I'm Korean American, I feel like I don't belong in Korea or in America." That's what my friend H told me one day, a few years ago. H was born in America and she lived there until she was 6 or 8, but she had since lived most of her life in Korea by that point. It's a take that's often repeated by many Asian Americans, and honestly, I'm a bit tired of it. I didn't feel like I belonged in Korea, either. Indeed, who is it that gets to feel like they belong in Korea? If you're a wheelchair user, most of the Korean public transportation system is not readily accessible to you. If you're mixed-race, Korea will let you know that they see you as a foreigner, even if you were born in Korea and you've lived there all your life. If you're poor, or queer, or fat, or frankly speaking, different in any way from the social norm, Korea will tell you that you don't belong here. So isn't it just the people who are able to conform to the

social norm of what it means to be a “good Korean” that get to feel like they belong? Taken in this context, is this sense of belonging, especially when it gets tied to a nation, something that we should really strive for?

Then when it comes to America, who gets to feel like they belong there? Native Americans? African Americans? Who truly “feels at home” in America? M, who’s a Latino friend, went back to America after teaching English in Korea for a year. Little more than two weeks in, he already faced racism in the country he was born in. Do you think he feels *comfortable* and *happy* about being in America? When Korean Americans say *I feel like I don’t belong in Korea or America*, who are these imagined Koreans or Americans that feel that sense of belonging? Isn’t it able-bodied, straight, middle- or upper-class, conventionally attractive, ethnically “pure” Korean or White people?

Taken in this context, is this sense of belonging, especially when it gets tied to a nation, something that we should really strive for?

Belonging as: a commodity

Since things are getting a bit serious, let me change up the pace with something a bit more lighthearted for a second. Did I tell you about that time I went on a date with someone who I can only describe as “aggressively Mitte”?⁶ No? Okay, listen to this. So we match on Feeld, and for what it’s worth, he’s very witty and funny. Now that gets a lot of bonus points with me. We talk for a little bit, then he asks me out for a date – he wants to meet at the Soho House in Mitte. I’ve heard of Soho House before, and I knew vaguely that it was some sort of a social club that you pay for so that you get to hang out with other “cool and hip” people. I also knew it had a very exclusionary vibe. Not usually my thing, but I was curious, and I figured, why not – I had been curious about what Soho house looks like in general, and I was especially keen to find out what Soho house would look like in Berlin.

We meet in front of the Soho House hotel right on the verge of Mitte and Prenzlauerberg. He seems nice enough, and he’s just as funny in person. He’s a software engineer, a short king from London with the confidence of someone who owns his own apartment, and makes 10 times what I make. We go in, where at the counter he’s asked to verify his Soho House membership. After this crucial step, we’re allowed to step into the dark, sleek elevator that takes you to the top floor of the hotel. When the elevator doors open, I say: “Wow, it’s so LA.” He smirks, presumably feeling mighty proud of himself.

Plush, gorgeous chairs made from wood, velvet, and leather fill the spacious floor that’s illuminated by soft, orange light. In the middle, there’s a square-shaped metallic bar that can’t seem to make up its mind between being industrial or Western. Right over the bar there is a massive chandelier that screams at you to notice it, and you can’t not notice it, because the chandelier takes up at least 25% of the ceiling height.

“so LA” is that there is nothing original about this space. Everything is brand-spank-ing-new. This bar could have been in LA, San Francisco, New York, London, Tokyo, Seoul, Paris, and there probably is a bar exactly like this in every metropolitan city. It’s as if Soho house found a “fancy bar starter pack” and Control C + Control V’d it onto this bar, and something tells me that this isn’t too far from what actually happened.

We settle into the bar seat where he’s asked to verify his member status once again before he orders, and I wonder if this is his go-to move, taking girls to Soho House. I suppose in a city where spaziergang and a beer at the späti⁷ (that you pay for yourself) counts as a date, taking a girl to Soho House does give you a competitive edge. As I’m pondering about his success rate with this move, he orders Martinis for the both of us and some small plates. It’s wildly overpriced, and the bartender does an excellent job at upselling – Would you like to upgrade the fries to truffle fries? Would you like a garlic aioli with your Calamari? It’s made in-house! – and each time, he nods and assents like a benevolent Chinese emperor – *Of course I would like every single add-on you have to offer. Can’t you see that I can afford it?*

The Martinis are fine. I asked it to be extra dirty, and for the price, I would have thought that the bartender would know how to make it to perfection. It’s just your regular Martini. After two of those and three small plates – the bill now coming up to a quarter of my rent – he asks if I want another one.

“Um... Do you like dive bars?”

“Dive bars? Of course I like dive bars! I’m a man that can do both, you know. Luxury and grittiness. I know a great dive bar around here. Shall we go there?”

I’m surprised, because I love dive bars and I hadn’t managed to find any good dive bars in Mitte. Here’s the thing about fancy bars and cocktails for me – I’ve gone to enough fancy bars in my life. I had my artisanal cocktail phase. Tolstoy said something like “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” right? I would say that all fancy bars are alike; each dive bar is divey in its own way – hence why I love dive bars. There’s only so many signifiers you can use for opulence, luxury, exclusivity. That’s why no matter what spin you put on it, they all end up looking the same. Fancy bars become a sort of non-place⁸, standardized and universal, anonymous and lonely, no different, in its essence, from hotel rooms and airport terminals.

I remember being on a date (yes... another one) in Pussyfoot Saloon in Seoul, an upscale cocktail bar that won the “One to Watch” award at Asia’s 50 Best Bars in 2019. The lawyer I was on a date with was telling me that he did the triathlon because as a lawyer, he was already “at the top of the intellectual pyramid,” so he had to prove to himself that he was “also at the top of the physical pyramid” by completing the triathlon. But the saddest thing I saw in that bar was not this “top-of-the-intellectual-and-physical-pyramid” lawyer, it was actually this middle-aged man who sat next to us. He had ordered a huge bottle of Dom Perignon, and he was drinking it all by himself with what looked like an exquisitely cooked steak. All the while, he kept trying to chat with the insanely busy

bartender who was managing a full bar on a Friday evening. The bartender was being as courteous and friendly as possible to the man who's no doubt one of his highest-paying regulars as the man kept downing glass after glass of Champagne. I remember thinking, *my god, is this the only way he can get someone to talk to him? What a terrible, lonely existence that must be.*

Pause. Fast forward. Let's bring it back to the scene in Berlin. We leave Soho House, and I'm quite excited to find out what this mysterious dive bar is. The walk is a bit longer than I expected, the route taking sharp turns around the luxury boutique stores in Mitte. It was late October and already cold as hell, so I'm thinking *this bar better be worth it* when we walk past the Aesop store on Alte Schönhauser Str.

"Get you a man who uses Aesop hand wash." T says, smirking. I'm not quite sure how to respond, because a) isn't it quite common to have Aesop hand wash? And b) I never thought that the type of handwash a person uses was a good measure of their character...? I shrug and mumble a "Eh..." to which he points at the Le Labo shop down the road, and says: "Yeah, actually, I use Le Labo handwash. Get you a man who uses Le Labo handwash, eh?" Before I can even think of a response to that, we've arrived at the location. It's the bar at Dead Chicken Alley. If you don't know what that is, good, because it is the most basic and touristic "Berlin" spot you can think of. So basic, in fact, that I had visited it on my first trip to Berlin in 2016 when I was a college student. The bar itself – called Café Cinema – is fine, if you don't mind paying €5.50 for a draft beer while getting scowled at by the bartender who's sick and tired of tourists constantly flooding the bar.

"Oh, I've been here before."

He's devastated. He's so disappointed that I know this spot. Believe me, darling, I was more disappointed than you were. Because for a second I wanted to believe that you had more to offer than Soho House, wanting to maximize shareholder value, and Le Labo handwash. And if you're reading this, T, not that you ever would, I'm sorry that I ghosted you... but not really.

At this point of the essay I'd like you, the reader, to close your eyes and imagine what this man looks like. I've mentioned that he's short, but what does his hair look like? His eyes? His skin? If you imagined a white man with a man-bun and an arc'teryx vest, that's a great guess. But actually, he was born in India and he had moved to London when he was 11. And that, for me, added an intricate layer to the ick – it's this feeling of *I must excel, I must outdo everyone, I must make my family proud, and I must prove it with these material things I've amassed, are you proud of me now, mom, now that I'm a member of Soho House and I use Le Labo handwash?* It was that desperate and ferocious competitiveness that brought me back to my life in Korea, and how everything had felt like a race ever since I went back to Korea at age 14. *I need to get good grades in middle school so I can get into a better high school, I need to*

do even better in high school to get into a good university, then I must do even better even better to get a respectable job that would make my family proud, then marry a doctor or a lawyer, and pop out babies that will make me proud by participating in this rat race once again, then they can also pop out babies so that they too can continue running, running, running, running. My family wasn't even that intense in terms of putting pressure on me but I still felt that societal pressure keenly every moment of my life in Korea, and I... I'm sorry, T, I couldn't. I literally could not, and I can not.

When belonging requires you to have certain belongings – such as a Soho House membership and Le Labo handwash – doesn't that mean that belonging is behind a paywall for you? And once you pay the price to belong, do you even truly feel like you belong? Did having those things make you feel like you were part of an elite group, and did it make you feel "happy and comfortable"? I'm not sure what your answer would be, T. If those things didn't make you feel like you belonged, then what good was it for? But if it did genuinely make you feel like you belonged... then honestly, that's even worse.

Belonging as: an endgoal

As is the case in Linkin Park's song, discourse around belonging often has a teleological undertone. "I wanna find something I've wanted all along... Somewhere I belong." Okay, but what happens when you do find it? Because we hear a lot of stories about not feeling like you belong in place A, and then through trials and tribulations, finally finding that "somewhere you belong" in place B. Many 19th-century novels and fairytales end with a "and then they lived happily ever after" as soon as the narrative comes to a heterosexual marriage, as if they are scared to find out what happened after that. I feel that we talk about belonging in a similar way. *I was so lost and alone, but I found my chosen family, and now I'm saved.* Then does this mean that once you find somewhere you belong, you've officially won at life? You'll be happy forever?

Because I did find somewhere I felt like I truly belonged. When I moved to LA to do my PhD in English Literature at University of Southern California, I was over the moon. I had wanted to do a PhD in America since I was 19, and I got to do it in LA, of all places. I felt intellectually fulfilled, I loved the friends I made in LA, and for once in my life I didn't feel like my Koreanness was under review. It felt like a dream come true... until it didn't. That's the fun and cruel part about life, isn't it? Things change, and so do people, and sometimes you find yourself walking away from something that you've wanted your whole life. Life is fragile. So is belonging.

Belonging as: cruel optimism

In Cruel Optimism, Lauren Berlant writes that a relation of "cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." In that relation, "the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought

you to it initially.”⁹ I wonder if our relationship to the sense of belonging can also be seen as a relation of cruel optimism. We yearn for the sense of belonging because it promises us happiness and comfort, but does the act of yearning for it bring us happiness and comfort? When the sense of belonging implicitly relies on external validation, when it can act as a boundary that divides who “really” belongs and who doesn’t, when it comes with a price tag, and when, even after you attain it, it can be lost – wouldn’t it be fair to say that we are staking too much on something that is so unreliable? Because the truth is that there is no place on Earth that will give you that full sense of belonging, especially not forever. Then, the idea that there is this imagined place in the distant future which will give us that satisfaction of belonging keeps us in a relation of cruel optimism in the sense that it keeps us invested in this fantasy while we ignore the now.

Belonging as: a somatic process

While writing this piece I was thinking about how we could think of belonging in other ways. I wanted to find a way to think about belonging less as a “thing” that can be achieved, obtained, or bought. I think one way of doing that is to think of belonging as a somatic process, an ongoing process of adjusting your body to the environment that you’re in. I’ve been in Berlin for about 6 months now, but I feel like my body and my brain are still stuck in Korea time. What I mean is that even though I don’t need to be, I can’t help but feel like I have to be in a rush. The Korean expression would be “마음이 급하다,” a literal translation of which is “my heart is in a rush.”

Let me give you an example. One day, I was running about 10 minutes late to work. I felt the panic rising in my throat because the company I worked for in Seoul had a very complicated humiliation ritual for when you were late. If you were even 1 minute late, you had to fill out a report about why you were late, how sorry you are, and how you’ll make sure it won’t happen again, then you had to get it signed by your manager, then your manager’s manager, then hand it *in person* to HR. And even though the company I work for now in Berlin doesn’t have that same fucked up, patronizing, humiliating policy, my body hasn’t yet realized that I don’t need to panic when I’m late. I ran to the U-Bahn and saw that my train was just pulling in. And in that moment of panic, as the metro doors opened I shoved past the people who were getting off without letting them get off first. While such shoving is standard and even necessary during commute times in Seoul, I could immediately tell by the look of horror on the people’s face that I had just committed a serious faux-pas. I was absolutely mortified. I felt like an uncivilized brute, an “ugly Korean,” as we like to say to refer to Koreans who are embarrassingly rude abroad because they don’t understand the local social rules. After that whole debacle, I arrived at the office 10 minutes late. And guess what? No one noticed or said anything.

It’s not only about work, though. My Saturdays are usually quite busy. I like to clean, do the laundry, go grocery shopping, do some translation work, then shower, get ready, and head out for whatever I’m doing that evening. Yes, it is a packed day, but there’s no reason for me to be in a rush – I can take my time. Yet I find myself thinking “이걸 빨리 끝내고 다음 걸 해야지 [I’ll quickly finish this and then move on to the next],” the imperative word being “빨리 [ppa-li],” quickly. Why am I doing that? Why am I trying to speedrun cleaning and laundry and groceries like I’m a gaming streamer that’s figured out how to “hack” life? I’ve often found myself trying to figure out the most efficient way to do... well, just about everything in my life. *I should get the laundry started first, as that takes about 90 minutes. Then, I’ll tidy up my room, vacuum, and mop. Then, I’ll go do my groceries. I need to return the Pfand bottles and cans, so I’ll go to Edeka first. I don’t like the produce at Edeka so much, so I’ll go to Lidl after that... and by the time I’ve come back, the laundry will be done, so I can hang it up to dry in my now clean room. Perfect.*

Perfectly efficient, but for what reason?

Why am I rushing to finish a task just so that I can finish another task? I know that this mode of speedrunning life keeps me in a constant state of anxiety, a way of living with clenched teeth, eyes sharp, muscles tense and ready to fire at any moment. *Running, running, running, running.* I feel this every day. I feel it every morning when I make my coffee and I have to consciously make an effort to not look at Slack while smoking my cigarette. *Just smoke. Just focus on smoking. Take this 3 minutes to yourself.* The thing is I know that I don’t need to live like this anymore. But just like how you feel a bit disoriented and your legs feel wobbly after you get off the treadmill, my body still feels like it should be running even after I’ve gotten off the endless treadmill that is South Korea.

The funny thing is that this isn’t an isolated incident – I know at least two Koreans who’ve told me that their heart, too, felt like it was in a rush when they just moved to Europe. They told me they’ve gotten better at not being in a rush, but it still happens sometimes. And even though it feels absolutely counter-intuitive for me, I’m trying my best to not be in a rush, to exist and not to run. Berlin is teaching me how to do that.

So do you feel like you belong in Berlin, then?

My answer to that question would have to be that... I don’t know. To be quite honest, I rarely felt like I belonged anywhere. And at my ripe old age of 31, I’m finally becoming okay with that feeling, which is something that I couldn’t do when I was 13. If anything, what I really want now isn’t to find “somewhere I belong” but rather for my time to belong to me. I wish I didn’t have to spend so much of my time and energy working to create value for corporations just so that they can divorce me from the actual value of my work and pay me a pittance. I know that both the Seoul and Berlin companies make a killing – but do I get any share of the profit? No, because that’s not how capitalist exploitation works.

So no, I don't want to buy a Soho House membership so that I can feel like I belong. Neither do I want to strive to become a "good Korean" so that I can finally feel like I belong in Korea. I want my time to belong to me, so that I'd have more time to read, write, think – to pet all the dogs – to marvel at the beauty of the flowers blooming by the side of the road – to smoke a cigarette and do nothing else in that moment – to be extravagantly inefficient – simply to be. That, to me, matters far more than trying to figure out where I "truly" belong.

- 1 Linkin Park, "Somewhere I Belong," track 3 on Meteora (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2003).
- 2 In 2007. 고성호, "서울 인구 1042만명... 4년째 증가," 한국일보, January 21, 2008, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/news/article/200801210589657186>
- 3 For our Berlin folks: Seoul is about 32% smaller in geographic area than Berlin, but has nearly 2.8 times more people (Berlin: 891 km², 3.7 million people). Berlin Business Location Center, "Berlin at a Glance," <https://www.businesslocationcenter.de/en/business-location/berlin-at-a-glance>
- 4 Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "Belonging," <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/belonging>
- 5 Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 222n12.
- 6 A central borough of Berlin, home to luxury boutiques, major cultural landmarks, and key financial and political institutions.
- 7 Spaziergang: a walk, späti: a convenience store.
- 8 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1992).
- 9 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.



meine königin

MATTHIAS STELTE

Jeder Platz ist besetzt. Sogar hier oben auf der Empore. Aufgeregtes Geflüster erfüllt den Raum. Der Weihnachtsbaum leuchtet und strahlt. Kerzen brennen. Die Kirchenglocken rufen die letzten, die noch auf dem Weg sind, zur Eile. Gleich beginnt der Gottesdienst an diesem Heiligen Abend.

Ich sitze schon eine Stunde hier oben auf der Orgelbank. Ich habe noch einmal vor dem Gottesdienst geübt, meine Finger warm gespielt, alles ist vorbereitet. Auch wenn ich sehr aufgeregt bin, macht sich in mir eine Ruhe breit. Ich fokussiere mich auf die Notenblätter, die vor mir liegen und gehe im Kopf noch einmal alles durch.

Ich knete meine Hände. Die Glocken läuten langsam aus. Meine Hände schwitzen. Mein Herz klopft. Ich spüre die erwartungsvollen Blicke, die letzten Gespräche verstummen. Es ist soweit. Ich hole noch einmal tief Luft und dann setze ich an. Laut, kraftvoll, freudig erklingt die Orgel. Ich habe die strahlenden, hellen Register gezogen, der Klang flutet den Raum mit seinen festlichen Tönen. Die Heilige Nacht ist angebrochen. Einst verkündeten die Engel den Hirten die frohe Nachricht von der Geburt es Jesukindleins, heute ist es die Orgel, die den Beginn dieser besonderen Nacht ankündigt. Alle, die hier heute versammelt sind hören ihre Botschaft. Die Kinder, die ganz aufgeregt sind, weil gleich ihr Krippenspiel beginnt und dann endlich, endlich gibt es zu Hause die Bescherung. Die alte Frau, die sich so sehr auf das Singen der Weihnachtslieder gefreut hat. Wo die Glocken bis vor wenigen Minuten eine Einladung an die Welt aussprach, lädt die Orgelmusik jetzt und hier zum Gottesdienst.

Ich bin in diesem Moment, in dem so viele Menschen um mich herum sind und auf mein Spiel hören, allein mit mir selbst. An einem normalen Sonntag sitzt niemand hier oben auf der Empore, ich bin unsichtbar für die Gemeinde, sie hört nur mein Orgelspiel. Ich singe manchmal auf der Orgelbank mit und werde so ein Teil der Gemeinde, auch wenn niemand von den wenigen Gottesdienstbesuchern im Kirchenschiff mein Singen hört. Heute ist alles anders. Obwohl die Kirche bis auf den letzten Platz gefüllt ist, bin ich doch der einsamste Mensch für ein paar Augenblicke in der Kirche, ich bin derjenige der die Orgel lenkt und die Gemeinde leitet, niemand kann mir bei dieser Aufgabe helfen. Nachdem das Vorspiel erklungen ist, begrüßt der Pastor die Gemeinde. Es folgt das erste Lied, „Lobt Gott ihr Christen alle gleich“, es stimmt auf den Heiligen Abend und das Weihnachtsfest ein, die Gemeinde singt laut mit, ich konzentriere mich. Takt halten, im Rhythmus bleiben, es ist nichts wichtiger als das bei einer großen, vollen Gemeinde. Viele, die heute sind, sind nur an diesem einzigen Tag im Gottesdienst, ich muss die Gemeinde sicher führen mit meinem Orgelspiel. Ich schaue in den Spiegel, der links über Meine Königin Matthias Stelte.

mir angebracht ist und sehe den Pastor. Wir sind bei der zweiten Strophe, jetzt kommen noch zwei. Am Ende von Strophe setze ich kurz ab damit die Gemeinde Zeit hat um Luft zu holen. Aber auch hier gilt: nicht zu lange, ich muss im Takt bleiben. In der kurzen Pause nehme ich einen Registerwechsel vor, ich ziehe zwei weitere Register während ich ein anderes zurückschiebe. Mit meinen Händen wechsele ich mit Beginn der nächsten Strophe auch das Manual. Die Melodie der dritten Strophe erklingt jetzt auf dem Oberwerk und die Begleitstimmen spiele ich auf einem anderen Manual und im Pedal, bevor in der letzten Strophe wieder alles zusammengeführt wird und ein satter Klang entsteht. Ich habe die Gemeinde, sie folgt mir, ich gebe den Ton an im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes. Die Orgel, sie gibt mir Selbstvertrauen, sie gibt mir Stärke. Es ist mein Instrument. Ich denke an meine gleichaltrigen Klassenkameraden. Freunde? Habe ich kaum, ich bin der Außenseiter. Aber hier bin ich es nicht. Das Selbstbewusstsein, was mir so oft fehlt, hole ich mir hier zurück. Die Orgel ist ein Instrument wie gemacht für einen schwulen Jungen auf dem Land wie ich es bin.

Erleichterung macht sich in mir breit, Vorspiel und das erste Lied ist geschafft, jetzt wird ein Psalm gelesen dann kommt das Gloria Patri. Ich habe Zeit, den nächsten Choral vorzubereiten und lege mir alles auf das Notenpult. Ich ziehe leise einige Register, kontrolliere noch einmal alles. Nun bin ich ganz in meinem Element, hochkonzentriert und fokussiert. Mit jedem Choral fällt etwas Anspannung ab. Jetzt kann ich es genießen, hier oben zu sitzen und die Orgel zu spielen. Dankbarkeit überkommt mich, ein Gefühl der Wärme und des Glücks steigt in mir auf. Und ein Gefühl der Ehrfurcht und des Respekts, dass ich an diesem 300 Jahre alten Instrument sitzen und spielen darf. Meine Großmutter, die erst vor wenigen Monaten starb, stammte hier aus dieser Gemeinde. Zu den Klängen dieser Orgel wurde sie getauft, saß sie unzählige Male mit ihren Eltern und Geschwistern am Heiligen Abend in der Kirche, sie lauschten und sangen zu der Orgel, die ich heute spiele.

Nach dem Gottesdienst kommen Menschen auf mich zu. „Wie schön Sie gespielt haben. Vielen Dank.“

Die Orgel ist queer. Daran kann es keinen Zweifel geben. Und wer jetzt entrüstet widersprechen möchte, dass ein Instrument überhaupt nicht queer sein kann, dem möchte ich entgegen: Ja warum denn nicht?

Es beginnt schon mit der Bezeichnung. Die Orgel wird als die Königin der Instrumente bezeichnet. She is the Queen, bitch! An dieser Stelle ist schon alles gesagt. Die Orgel ist eine Königin aus mehreren Gründen. Das beginnt mit der Erscheinung. Geht in die Kirchen und schaut euch die Instrumente an. Es müssen keine Kathedralen oder Domkirchen sein, auch auf dem Land, in von außen unscheinbaren Dorfkirchen finden sich viele Juwelen. Die Orgel thront auf der Empore und strahlt über allem. Immer. Sie blickt von oben herab, das macht sie in der Kirche genauso wie im Konzertsaal. Und wie sie da oben steht: Eingekleidet in einem aufwändigen Gewand, das Orgelprospekt ist reich verziert. Goldene Engel schweben über ihr, kunstvolle Schnitzereien fassen die mächtigen Basspfeifen ein. Die Orgel, sie steht da wie in einer funkelnden und glitzernden Paillette, wie eine Dragqueen mit einer meterhohen Perücke, mit dreifachen Augenwimpern und einem kräftigen Lippenstift: She is the Queen! Und wir wissen: Wenn jemand Glitzer und Paillette tragen kann, dann sind es wir Gays, die queeren Boys und Girls, die eine Paillette würdevoll und mit Stil tragen. Und ebenso würdevoll thront die Orgel in ihrem ganzen goldenen Tand an ihrem Platz, sie sitzt da und herrscht mit den Tönen über das Haus.

Und das ist der nächste Hinweis auf die queerness dieses Instruments: die Musik. Die Orgel ist fluid und wandelbar, sie lässt sich in keine Kategorie stecken. Sie kann laut und leise sein, zart, sanft, dominant, ihre Töne sind mal strahlend, mal streichelnd, mal schnarrend, mal filigran dann wieder majestätisch. Die Orgel, sie ist femme und butch zugleich, sie kann, innerhalb einer Sekunde von fröhlich-lärmend zu leise-nachdenklich wechseln, zu fordernd-protestierend zu wärmend-solidarisch, sie hält für jede*n einen Rat und ein paar Takte musikalischer Zärtlichkeit bereit. Und sie ist da. Wer im Gottesdienst oder im Konzert sitzt, sieht die Orgel oft nicht, der Blick ist nach

vorn, auf den Altar gerichtet und die Orgel befindet sich im Rücken. Auch wenn sie in diesem Moment unsichtbar sein mag: Sie ist da. Sie verschafft sich Gehör. Immer, denn sie ist ein Teil der Gemeinde. Sichtbar für den, der sie sehen will.

So geht es uns Queers auch. Wir sind da. Immer, und wer uns sehen will, der sieht uns. Wir sind laut und wir können auch leise sein wir, sind wandelbar, bunt und fluide und in uns drin, in unserem Inneren sind wie Queens. Wir tragen uns Sein mit dem gleichen Stolz, mit dem eine Orgel an ihrem Platz über allem thront.

Frühjahr 2020. Die Nachrichten kennen nur ein Thema: Lockdown, Corona-Fallzahlen, warten auf einen Impfstoff. Auf den Intensivstationen sterben die Menschen. Angst geht um. Wir sind zu Hause eingesperrt. Die Straßen sind leer. Und auch die Kirchen. Das ist mein Glück. Nichts hat mich so sehr durch Corona getragen wie eine leere Kirche. In mir ist eine tiefe Traurigkeit.

Ich sitze wieder auf der Orgelbank. Doch heute rufen keine Glocken zum Gottesdienst, es laufen keine aufgeregten Kinder auf der Empore herum, nicht einmal Lichterglanz erfüllt den Raum. Es ist kalt, ich habe mir einen elektrischen Heizlüfter hinter die Orgelbank gestellt und einen dicken Pullover angezogen. Auf der Orgelbank kann ich für einen Moment die rastlose Welt, die in diesen Tagen und Wochen stillzustehen scheint, vergessen. Und ich kann meine Traurigkeit vergessen. Ich versinke in der Musik und verliere mich in einzelne Takte, die mir nicht gelingen wollen. Ich übe diese zwei Takte nur im Pedal, dann mit der linken Hand, danach mit der rechten Hand. Das Pedal zusammen mit der linken Hand, ich übe solange, bis meine Füße und Finger von alleine wissen, was zu tun ist. Ich übe weiter, das Pedal mit der rechten Hand, dann nur die Hände ohne Pedal, es vergehen fünf Minuten, 20 Minuten, die Zeit verrinnt, jetzt probiere ich alle Stimmen zusammen – und dann passiert es. Die Vollkommenheit der Musik in diesen zwei Takten erklingt. Es ist so schön, so wundervoll, ich lächele. Ich hebe meine Hände von den Tasten, der Klang hallt in dieser kathedralenartigen Kirche inmitten von Neukölln nach. Ich schließe die Augen, atme durch, spiele noch einmal die beiden Takte. Ich stehe auf und gehe vorn an die Brüstung und gucke in das leere Kirchenschiff. Ich höre Schritte, es ist der Hausmeister. „Wieder fleißig am üben?“ ruft er mir fröhlich zu. „Ja, irgendwann werde ich hoffentlich wieder mehr Zuhörer haben“ antworte ich. Ich denke an die vielen Gottesdienste die ich in meinem Leben schon gespielt habe. In vollen Kirchen, in leeren Kirchen. Zu Hochzeiten, zu Taufen, in Friedhofskapellen zu Beerdigungen. Ich bin hier oben auf der Empore allein in der kalten Kirche, abgeschottet von der Welt und doch verbunden mit der Welt. Die Musik ist der wärmende Mantel, der sich um mich legt, der mich tröstet, der mich hält. Ich spüre das Leben in mir.





a sunday

LARA A. SPRINGS

I fish for the keys in my pockets, carefully picking the right one and holding the remaining bundle of keychains and knick-knacks in my hand. I squeeze my fist and it hurts a little, but it's nothing compared to how much this dinner is about to hurt. A bird is howling in the darkness, and I wish I were the kind of person who knew birds. Is it an owl? Are owls supposed to scare the shit out of you with their screeching? If so, well done owl. Consider me terrified.

The key turns, the door unlocks. I throw my jacket on the hanger and it slips down on the floor, where I leave it for later. Mom will be so pissy when she sees it. My steps are echoing in the empty hallway as I make my way to the downstairs bathroom. The pack of cigarettes in my hands is soggy and I really should have taken that umbrella, huh? Ali was right, she is always right, but you better not tell her that. She's intolerable enough, adorably so. I smoke one cigarette, then another. I take my time, hidden away in the bathroom. Mom will be so angry I'm late for Sunday dinner, but not as angry as she'll be when she finds out I've been smoking in her precious seaside themed loo. I get my butt all cozy on the tacky sand-and-shells toilet seat and get ready to smoke a third ciggy, when someone knocks at the door, "Betty?"

Ugh. Busted.

My sister Annabelle opens the door and for a moment, there's three of us in the bathroom. Me, my twin, and our reflection in the mirror.

"Mom's fucking fuming," my sister whisper-shouts dramatically. Her hair is sticking out everywhere, but that serves her well. Short hair belongs to me, stupid copycat. I invented it.

"Yeah, and?" When is she not? Why should I care about Mom, when Mom never cares about me? She has no idea how much it cost me to get out of bed. How horrible it is to find trousers that fit, brush a comb through my hair. Mom doesn't see any of it. She only sees what she wants to see. And right now, what she'll see is me, a rebellious daughter late for family dinner. Again.

"And what's that?" My sister is staring at my nose, and it hits me. I've forgotten a very important step in my coming home routine.

"Nothing," I mumble, pushing the piercing back up my nostrils. It stings a little, and the meat is tender there, but it's already gotten much better. When I sneezed earlier I didn't even shed a tear, which must mean it's healing.

But nothing gets past Belle and heaven forbid Miss Perfect Twin lets it slide. "I said. What in the bloody hell is that?"

"Nothing," I repeat, playing with the toilet roll.

"That was not agreed."

Ah, yes. The agreement. The one we made when we were eleven, promising that we would never change our appearance without the other's approval.

"We're adults, Belle."

Belle's eyes are my eyes. Belle's smile is my smile. Belle's body is my body. Can I have one fucking thing that's just for myself?

“It was a blood pact.”

“We were eleven. Things change, we grew up.”

She stares at me and I stare right back till Belle gives in. “You changed, Betty.” She puts the emphasis on ‘you’ and it sounds bitter in her mouth, “Anyway, Mom will kill you.”

The bathroom door slams in my face and I’m left to stare at the collection of wooden ship wheels hanging at different heights. And for a brief second, I hope my sister will leave me alone. I should be so lucky. A moment later, Belle opens the door with an apologetic look.

“Let’s go,” she says.

I follow her down the hallway, back to the main entrance and towards the dining-room. I ignore the pictures hanging on the wall, family portraits and snippets of a life I’ve long left behind. There are smiles in those photos, a happiness that I cannot remember.

Belle walks us to the dining-room but before we step in, I stop. I take a deep breath. My sister catches me, because that’s what twin sisters do. Funny how she gets to notice everything and only cares about the wrong things.

“Don’t be weird,” she tells me and oops, too late. Born weird. Lucky me, I got it all.

“Don’t be a cunt,” I reply, and she punches my shoulder proving that she is, in fact, a cunt.

The room is full and loud. The entire family is there, sitting at the large table. Grandma Catherine and Grandpa Thomas, almost two-hundred years between the two of them. Aunt Rosie with her new husband and her creepy son Lucas, Uncle Jimmy with his wife “The Surgeon”, Uncle Seymour and Lucien, his “Friend”. My gaze lingers when I see them, chairs pushed close, and they wave at me in sync. I don’t wave back, because I know they know my secret and they know I know theirs. They know and yet, when Mom says my hair is too short and my face without makeup is too ugly, they never react. When Mom says that I can’t bring Ali to dinner, that she’s just a phase and I’ll get tired of her, and then I’ll be normal again, just give it time Betty, Seymour and Lucien never say anything. It makes me mad, so mad. Why are they allowed to be gay and I’m not? We’re the same thing. I want to scream the question in the room, but then Dad is coming up to hug me, “Hi, jellybean.” There he is, the other half of the problem. My tongue is heavy in my mouth, the words stuck in my throat.

Dad ruffles my hair, breaking the gel, “I missed you.”

It’s as casual as it gets, but it slices through me. Did you, Dad, did you miss me? You know where I live, where I’ve been living for years, now, with my female girlfriend. If you missed me so much, you have a car. You have an address. Is it that hard? Is it too much to ask?

Apparently, it is.

Dad goes back to sit at the big wooden table, second chair to the left. Third chair to the left, my older brother stands up next. He goes to hug me but doesn’t even say hello.

His wife is pregnant, he announces, straight to the point. She’s not feeling well so she stayed home, but she sends her regards and wishes to know how I’m feeling. She is the one asking, not my brother.

“Congrats,” I tell him, although what I really want to say is, “Condolences.” I hadn’t even noticed the wife wasn’t there, but I don’t mind. One less person to annoy me tonight.

And finally, there she is. Head of the table, head of the household. Her eyes are actually on fire when she eventually glares at me.

“You’re late. And you fucking reek. You’ll end up with cancer.”

“Hi, Mom.”

Nobody hears her, they are too busy with their own stories, with their own voices to care about us. To care about me. Mom wiggles her hands in the air till I am sitting next to her, first chair to the left. Annabelle takes her usual seat across from me and gives me a disapproving look.

“Do you remember Miss Larson, darling?” Grandma Catherine asks me, raising her voice. I remember my schoolteacher, yes. What about her? I don’t even have time to voice the question.

“She’s retiring this year. I heard that she’s moving to the countryside since her husband is now dead. Have you heard from her lately?” Grandma asks.

I pretend to think about it but no, I have not heard from my schoolteacher. Last time I saw Miss Larson was on my last day of school, as it should be.

“Apparently, her son moved to Japan last year. He’s supposed to be incredibly handsome, have you ever met him, Betty?” Aunt Rosie asks me, and I’m not sure how I’m supposed to have met someone who I didn’t know existed. And now that he’s moved to the other side of the world, I will never meet him, so why does this matter? I keep my mouth shut, because I don’t need to say anything anyway. They’ve got enough words.

“I heard some of her students went by the school to give their regards on her last day. Seems like she was a really good teacher. Were you in the same class, Belle?”

My sister meets my eyes and she offers a smile that I don’t return. “No, actually, no. Betty and I went to two different schools,” Belle tells Aunt Rosie, as if it’s brand-new information.

“Well, you should’ve been there, Betty,” Grandma Catherine says, “I’m sure Miss Larson would have loved to see you again.”

“Yeah,” I comment, and then Dad is passing a plate over. Sunday roast.

“Actually—” I’d like to remind him that I don’t eat meat, I’d like to list every unethical reason why it would be best if they all stopped eating meat, but I bite my tongue. Dad’s looking at me, a confused look on his face. It lasts only a second, then he’s looking away, disinterested. I’ve tried already and look what good it did. Mom screamed at me that it’s all nonsense and made roast again. I accept the plate with a nod and grab a piece with my fork. I am so, so sorry, I tell the meat as I push it to one corner. I am so sorry I am too weak to fight with my family. So sorry, and I pass the roast.

“What did you think of the game last night, jellybean? “And suddenly, I’m catapulted to the other side of the conversation. Uncle Jimmy raises his brows expectantly and my creepy cousin Lucas simply stares at me without saying anything.

It’s sweet how Dad thinks he’s coming to the rescue. It’s a little less sweet that he never actually asked if I like football. I don’t. I don’t even know what ball belongs to football.

Uncle Jimmy asks for the salad, and I reach over to hand the bowl to him. “They paid that referee, one hundred percent. Annulling a perfectly decent goal? And for what?”

My cousin Lucas simply nods, a slow awkward movement.

“The season’s just started, and it’s already going to shit. Will you come over for the game next week, Betty?”

When’s that supposed to be? Why am I invited? I don’t have time to ask any of these questions, I don’t have time to say absolutely anything before Mom locks eyes with me.

“Didn’t you say last week that you were throwing out those trousers, Elisabeth?”

It’s more a statement than a question, but Mom still stares at me somewhat judgmentally. Her hair has turned greyer. She must have been to the hairdresser recently, because it falls in nice soft layers around her face. Her brows are almost completely white and her green eyes are tired, surrounded by wrinkles. They were much kinder, once. They used to tell me, ‘I love you, Betty, no matter what. I love you and your sister and your brother forever.’

Now, the corners of her lips are turned downwards. Her lips are pressed into a thin line. The skin on her neck is hanging lower. She used to love me so fiercely, and now.

“Did you not have a nicer jumper to wear?” Mom passes me the potatoes and I drop some on my plate. Not too many, or else—

“Leave some for the rest of us, will you?” Dad jokes, and maybe he truly doesn’t know better, maybe he’s been married to Mom a little too long.

“I’ve started this new diet recently, Betty. A colleague from Pediatrics passed it on at work and you must try it! It does wonders. Basically, if you combined intermittent fasting and a Paleo approach...” The Surgeon chimes in and I stop listening immediately. It happens all the time when she opens her mouth. Perhaps it’s also the reason why I have no idea what her name is, I just know she’s a surgeon and that she’s been married to Uncle Jimmy for about two years. I don’t care to know more. To be fair, she doesn’t care to know more about me either.

As I look around the table, I allow myself to linger on that thought a little longer.

The men are still discussing football and football-related plans for next weekend, the women are still gossiping about personnel of my old school. Seymour and Lucien are holding hands under the table and giggling above it. Mom, Belle and my brother are criticising my jumper, my entire closet, and brainstorming the colours I should wear more. Funny. What do they know about closets, anyway?

I can’t focus on anything, there’s too many chaotic conversations, too many questions being thrown here and there. But nobody at the table seems to be bothered.

They just chomp on the Sunday scrum happily, filling their bellies and filling the room with loud chatter and roaring laughter.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, interrupting my thoughts.

(Ali) Picking you up in ten? (Me) Make it thirty, Mom might get an aneurism if I leave before dessert.

(Ali) Blessing?

(Me) One can hope.

“No phones at the table, Elisabeth,” Mom’s voice is stern, but not surprised.

“Sorry, Mom.” I’m on autopilot and hate the way the words sound out of my mouth, but Mom doesn’t hear them. She’s already turned back to Belle, back to whatever they were talking about.

I’ve been playing with a potato on my plate when Grandpa Thomas catches my attention from the other side of the table. “You’ve been quiet.” He mouths at me.

He used to have all of his teeth and I used to sit on his knees when I was little. Belle and I always had the worst fights about who got to spend more time with Grandpa Thomas, whether it was helping him with the fishing rod or getting him the newspaper. Now his hands are too shaky to hold a fish and his eyes are too bad to read printed words. I give him a smile, the first real one since I’ve walked into my childhood home. I rest my chin on my hand and my fingers still smell like the forbidden cigarettes I had in the bathroom.

“I’m alright.” I mouth back at Grandpa, and he points at the kitchen.

“Grandma made dessert,” he says, a little louder for me to hear, “Your favourite.”

Grandpa Thomas doesn’t care about Miss Larson. He doesn’t care about football. He doesn’t care about my weight, has no idea what I’m wearing, doesn’t give a shit my phone’s on the table. He doesn’t care about my hair, doesn’t care how short it is. His smile is big and proud and it breaks me. It makes me want to cry, but I nod anyway and get up to retrieve the dessert from the kitchen.

On the counter is a tray. I walk closer, lifting the aluminium foil carefully and taking a peak underneath. My heart is beating wildly in my chest when I catch a sniff of strawberry. I knew this was coming, yet I can’t stop the tears from pooling in my eyes.

“Come on, Elisabeth. Everyone’s waiting, stop wasting our time. Will you grab the spoons, too?” Mom is behind me, puttering around with plates and bowls. Her voice makes me jump a little but I can’t move. I stare at the dessert a little longer, wishing I could disappear. She used to call me Betty, too. Mom used to call me Betty and now she calls me Elisabeth, and I don’t know who the fuck Elisabeth is supposed to be.

With a firm hand I rip the foil away and crumble it in my fist, revealing the dessert Grandma Catherine made especially for me.

Eton Mess.

Not my favourite. Belle’s favourite.

When I hear a car in the driveway, I've been waiting. Aunt Rosie is in the kitchen, helping Mom with the leftovers and the dishes. They're discussing how poorly the roast was salted, and Mom is shrieking, "Next time you cook then." I don't hear Aunt Rosie's response because in the living-room, Uncle Seymour is fighting with Uncle Jimmy as well. They're sitting on the couch with Aunt Rosie's husband and Lucien is standing in front of them, his face all red. My cousin Lucas is in a corner, observing quietly. Creepy.

"The kid won't turn gay, asshole. It doesn't work like that." Lucien's trying to make a point, and if this wasn't my family home, if I was just a little braver... I walk away, hating myself.

"Bye, Betty." Belle follows me in the hallway, she must have been reading my mind again with her twin superpowers. Or whatever, she must have heard the car pull up. Bending down, Belle reaches for my jacket and picks it up from where it fell on the floor earlier and holds it up for me to wear. One arm, then Belle walks around me and waits for me to slip the other arm in. Once I am dressed, Belle comes to stand before me.

"Have a nice evening," she says, handing me my pack of cigarettes. I must have left it in the bathroom, or maybe it fell down somewhere? I forgot.

I grab it. "Thanks."

I turn to leave, then I look back. Belle looks awfully like Mom. Her face is a little rounder than mine, her brows a little higher up. Details that have always been there, details that most people don't see, too lost in the concept of identical twins to notice the differences. The corners of Belle's lips are turned downwards, her lips are in a thin line. Short hair really doesn't suit her.

"You should let your hair grow. Maybe get some face framing layers."

Like Mom, I want to add, but I don't feel like getting slapped on a Sunday evening, so I just say, "I'd suit you."

Belle offers me a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. Exactly like Mom. I purse my lips, nod to myself and get the fuck out of my childhood home.

It's cold outside, but finally it's silent. I exhale a deep breath. The same bird (an owl?) from earlier is still shouting into the darkness, and I stop to listen. What is it calling for, I wonder. Is it having a good night? Is it waiting for a bird girlfriend to pick them up and save them from a horribly loud family?

Ali's parked right in front of the gate, and I squeeze the pack of cigarettes in my hands, considering my options. Behind the closed door, someone sounds rather angry that I've left without saying goodbye.

"How dare she? Where did she have to go?"

I run in the opposite direction, leaving the grumbling and the fussing where it belongs.

Ali's car is old, dusty and messy. It smells like five different smells, all mixed up in a scent I'd recognise everywhere: my girl's. Ali eats her lunch in her car, does her makeup in her car, keeps a change of clothes and a change of shoes in the back. There are dried flowers on the dashboard, pages scattered around the seats, some crumpled on the

floor. I count four cans of Redbull and one bottle of water, half empty. On my seat there's a half-eaten sandwich and a chocolate bar.

The radio is on low, and the hosts are chatting about the weather, about nothing. When I get in, Ali lowers the volume. She always does it, and it feels special how she only wants to hear my voice.

"Hey pretty." Her hand is cold on my cheek, but it spreads warmth everywhere. A single touch, and I'm shivering. I shake off the anxiety and my shoulders are a little lighter, the heavy weight of my family dissipating slowly. Ali brushes her hand through my hair.

"Missed you," I say, leaning in to kiss the tip of her nose.

Ali giggles, "Missed you, too."

It's ridiculous, it's only been a couple of hours, and yet. It's the truest truth of this Sunday evening. I miss Ali every moment that she isn't around.

"Got you a sandwich in case dinner was shite. But then I got hungry." Ali starts the engine, and I know her. She must have been so lost in whatever she was doing, eating being her last priority. A painting, a craft. Ali concentrates so intensely and for so long, the lines on her forehead are now permanent. She never stops when she's so deep. Her bladder doesn't matter, her stomach doesn't matter. Sometimes I wonder how it feels, not thinking about food constantly. Too much food, too little food. I grab the chocolate bar and flip it to check the calories. Too many. Ugh, alright. I throw it to the side and sink deeper in the car seat.

"Wanna go home?" Ali asks. Her bracelets are dangling at her wrist, hitting the steering wheel rhythmically. I stare at her absent-mindedly for a while as she drives, lulled by the swinging of silver charms. Her nails are purple tonight, matching with her skirt. The tips of her hair were blonde earlier, freshly bleached, but I am not surprised to see they're a new shade of blue now. It's all curled up and looks so soft, I must grab one strand of hair and twist it around my finger. She smiles at me when I do.

"Not really." I mumble. My throat is sore, although I must've spoken a total of ten words in total tonight.

"Alright." Ali thinks for a moment, then takes a left. "Pub?"

I simply hum in response, and Ali reaches for my hand. She doesn't say anything, she's never needed to. When I first met her, I thought Ali was a shy, quiet girl. She wears exclusively black, has the moon phases tattooed on the back of her hand and knows the meaning of every tarot in the deck. She never says too much, always chooses her words carefully. At the beginning I thought it was only a matter of time before Ali started to open up. But the more I got to know her, the more I understood what blessing it was to have someone like her in my life. Ready to give me a hug after a long day, ready to hold my hand after a rough night. Ali is the kind of person who'll bring you a sandwich after a family dinner, just in case family is too stressful and you forget to actually eat. Ali is also the person who will eat half of that sandwich, because she was thinking about you so much that she forgot about herself.

I squeeze her hand, toying with her bracelets. I move them away to reveal the black cat tattoo, hidden underneath her accessories. Bringing her hand closer, I drop a kiss to the little buddy. It's one of my favourite tattoos and she knows. She giggles in response but says nothing.

"They suck." I sigh, hoping she will ask more questions but knowing that she won't. I don't want to answer them anyway, I just want to complain and scream and hit a wall. I want my entire family to disappear, I want them to stop talking about other people and start talking to me. I want them to listen to what I have to say, listen to who I've become.

Ali hums, leaving me space to add whatever I need to add. But my brain is too empty and too full at the same time, so I drop her hand and start nibbling at the skin on the side of my thumb instead.

We drive in silence till we reach the pub, and then Ali is parking the car and jumping off. She didn't bring a jacket—typical Ali—so when she walks up to my side of the car and opens the door for me, she's shivering.

"Silly," I tell her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

She shrugs noncommittally and locks the car, throwing the key in her large bag. She'll complain she can't find it later, and I'll have to fish it out for her. I hug her closer, kissing her cheek.

"Thanks," I say, and I can feel her smile against my lips.

"Drinks on me," she replies, although being a witch is no real job and she's as broke as I am. My heart swells and it sits heavy in my chest as we walk towards the pub. The windows are foggy and when Ali goes to open the door for me, warmth and music hit my face. I step inside, Ali right behind me, her arms holding my hips tightly as she guides me through the crowd and to a table on the side, where some jackets are taking up space. I wonder where everybody is.

Ali takes a seat, but my pulse is rushing, and my mouth is dry.

"I'm gonna..." I eye the door, and Ali nods at me.

"Clio should be outside," she says, then lays her back against the wall and grabs a menu. She starts reading it as if it's new information, as if it's changed since we were here last time.

Then, Ali looks up and grins at me encouragingly.

Alright then. I pat my pockets, searching for the pack of cigarettes. It was just here, I'm sure I've put it right here.

Ali clears her throat. "Clio's got it."

Right. Right. Okay, here we go.

I've known Ali's friends for years. They're all around my age, they all have the same fucked up brain, the same shitty corporate job, and the same homophobic family. I've met them countless times and yet, I'm still nervous. My hands are shaking as I make my way to the back of the pub, where a green metal door will lead me outside, where the smokers are hiding. I feel a fresh wave of shame down my armpits, and I hold my breath for the next three steps. What if Clio doesn't remember me? What if

she's with much cooler people and cannot be arsed to talk to me? What if she's annoyed I'm again asking for cigarettes, what if she hates that I never bring my own? Fuck, this was a bad idea. Where is my pack? It was just here, Belle just gave it to me, didn't she? What's wrong with me, fuck. I am pushing the door open and the cold air hits me but I should go back. I should really go back. Clio is too cool, she's not even going to notice me—

"B! Right here." Clio's voice echoes in the dark evening. There's a small crowd outside, some with thick winter jackets, some with only a shirt. Gotta love British winter. Hot puffs of breath and smoke are lingering in the air. Clio is leaning against the brick wall, right by the trash cans. She's alone, a cigarette dangling from her lips. Her left boot is kicking stones on the pavement, her leg's a pendulum that swings back and forth. The ruffles of her skirt are making a gentle whoosh sound, and my brain decides to focus on that. It's easy, it's calming.

Clio wiggles her hand at me, urging me closer. "How're you doing?"

It's a simple question, really. Yet, she's the first person tonight who is asking me. I briefly wonder whether my entire family has forgotten how to put these four words together. How am I doing? Doesn't seem so hard to me.

I start formulating an answer, but it gets all too complicated too soon. Mom and Dad, Belle and Aunt Rosie, that fucking teacher from my school. I don't know where to start. I have to say something, though, I have to improvise. Say something, say something.

I give Clio a shrug and hold out a hand, hoping she'll understand. I hope with my entire body that she will. Clio's long lashes flutter, her lower lip trembles. I like Clio. The shape of her nails is weird, small and round, just like mine. She doesn't paint them, doesn't glue fake ones on, she just nibbles on them to the perfect length. Eventually Clio passes me the cigarette and I look at her nails. If she catches me staring, Clio doesn't say anything.

I take a long, blissful drag. Fuck, this feels good. "Mmh. Yes."

"Babe, I thought we were quitting?" Clio steals the cigarettes back and brings it to her dry lips. Her eyes roll back and she exhales deeply, a cheeky little smirk revealing a dimple on her chin. I want to offer her my lip balm but as I pat my pockets, I have to add it to the list of shit I've lost today. Cigarettes, lip balm, tissues. I can't even find my phone. Christ. What a mess.

Clio takes one final drag, then drops the cigarette and kills it with the heel of her boot.

"This is so unhealthy. We've got to do better, B."

"I had Sunday dinner," I explain, and that's all I need to say. Clio scans my face quickly, then purses her lips in worry and grabs my elbow. Without saying a word she rushes back into the pub, dragging me along with her. Opening the door, she shoves me back inside the pub where the air is stale and the temperature is warm. I rub my hands together, while Clio pushes me towards the table where Ali is now talking with Joe. As soon as I've taken a seat, Clio screams for Purnell at the bar and holds up three

fingers.

“Make it four?” Ali whispers, and Clio adds a finger quickly. From the other side of the pub Purnell nods, their hair falling onto their forehead.

“Seriously. I worry. You’ve been smoking a lot lately.” Clio’s turned her attention back to me and I instinctively lean into Ali’s side for support. Joe and Ali are also staring at me and it’s too many brown eyes, waiting for me to say something. I hate the attention, I hate being the only one at the table with blue eyes and anxiety. I’m tired of standing out, I want to disappear. Ali hugs my side and rests her hand on my hip, squeezing lightly.

“I’m alright. It was a long week,” I finally say. It explains everything and nothing, but Clio and Joe nod anyway. “Family sucks,” Clio comments, and under this light, her lashes seem even longer. I want to ask her where she gets it done, but what if she thinks I’m not the right girl, what if she laughs at me? I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Don’t tell me. My father wanted to have lunch today and I said, ‘Only if I can bring my boyfriend’, and Daddy went, ‘I’d rather never see you again’. What a dramatic bitch.” Joe snaps his fingers in outrage.

“Babe, what boyfriend?” Clio is on fire tonight, asking all the right questions. She’s got a real insightful gift.

Joe glares at her, brows raised a little too far up. “It’s the principle, Clio.”

Beside me, Ali offers a knowing hum.

“Don’t encourage him, he’s been whoring around again,” Clio says.

“Hey,” Joe argues, “I was in love once. I tried the relationship thing. Look how that turned out.”

I brace myself, never tired of hearing the story of how Joe got cheated on while he and his boyfriend were on vacation together.

“Are we talking about the Ex again?” Four beers appear on the table and with them, a gorgeous human being. “Alice, Clio, Elisabeth, hello ladies.”

Purnell shows us their perfect teeth and then they turn to greet Joe, “Hello, whore. You’re late.”

“Look, the hair, the fit. It takes time to look this perfect, alright?”

Purnell gives Joe a once over, lips pursed. But no matter how annoyed they try to look, there’s affection there. So much affection. Purnell takes a seat next to me, their soft delicate shirt brushing against my shitty jumper.

“So, about my Ex,” Joe says and here we go. Ali and Clio sigh, and Purnell unsubscribes from the conversation, turning to look at me with big sweet examining eyes.

“Hey, is that—?”

Then, the room is brighter. My chest is lighter and I sit a little straighter. I knew Purnell would notice.

“This old thing?” I pull my septum down, flinching only a little bit. Purnell smacks their hand on the table, almost dropping the drinks on the floor. I hold on to my pint with both hands, wishing I could sink my entire face in the foam. It’d be nice to hide in there.

“Hell yes. You look stun, honey. You could’ve said something, we could have gotten matching ones. Sisterhood of travelling piercings or whatever.”

It makes no sense but I love it, I’m already married to the idea, “You’d want a nose piercing?”

“I’d get a cock piercing, if I wasn’t thinking of getting that thing removed.”

Clio pops her tongue, tuning into our conversation, “Get it done babe, it’s nasty.”

“Uhm, I don’t think so.” Joe is sadly a minority in the group, but he still tries to get his voice heard. “I quite like dicks.”

Ali sighs. “We know, Joseph. The entire town knows.”

From across the table Joe slaps her arm and she catches his hand, holding it fondly in her hands.

“So? When did you get it, babe?”

I’m really not used to the attention, and the story of how I got my piercing comes out in disconnected fragments. I start from that studio with the green sign, the one across from the station. The owner is a nice person, has around fifteen piercings per ear and has a trail of stars tattooed on the forehead. Little stars, but still so many. Right on the temples. So pretty, would you ever get a face tattoo?

Joe is staring at me a little amused, and it definitely takes me too long to notice the little cross he’s got tattooed on his left cheekbone. With the realisation comes the mortification and I stumble on the next section of the story. Joe is giggling but my face is on fire and I have no idea how I get from wanting a piercing to actually getting an appointment.

“And did it hurt?” Purnell asks, a gentle hand landing on my forearm.

It did, fuck, it really hurt. I tell them how I cried, how I laughed, how crazy it felt to finally have something that was only mine, something that defines who I am as a unit, not as a comparison. I don’t realise there’s actual tears in my eyes right now till Ali rests her head on my shoulder. Clio is handing me a tissue.

“Well, it looks fire. Will you want to change it?”

They keep asking me questions, and when I finally get to the end of my story, I’ve spoken so much my throat is sore. This time for real, for all the right reasons. Ali is getting the next round, and she delivers our beers confidently, carrying four in one hand. Then, she produces a can of coke from her back pocket and winks at me. “I gotta drive.”

Clio is up next, telling a story about her latest exam at university, and everyone asks relevant questions, everyone engages. Even Ali, with few selected words and lots of meaningful silences. Joe tells the group the latest gossip from his apartment building, where apparently a nanny got locked out of the apartment and left a crying baby inside. It’s meaningless gossip and it reminds me of Miss Larson, but then Clio asks, “Did you all have a nanny growing up?” and Purnell laughs out loud.

“A nanny? May I remind you that we are fatherless—” Purnell points at themselves. “And motherless.” They point at Joe, and Joe nods in acknowledgment.

Ali takes a breath and it’s impressive how the entire table shuts up, waiting for her

to say something. “With your daddy issues, it’s easy to forget you grew up without a mother.”

I panic for a moment that she’s gone too far. The pub is quiet, even the music has gone silent as a song is finishing and a new one is beginning. Never in a million years would I make such a comment, I can just imagine the face of my old friends, the face Aunt Rosie would make.

Then, Joe ducks his head to the side. “First of all, missy, my daddy issues are totally innate. I was born with it, my dead mother had nothing to do with it.”

Purnell is cackling and Clio is actually holding her stomach. Joe covers his mouth but his laughter spills out anyway, a lovely sound that quickly turns into a snort. He pushes the hand closer, trying to conceal it, but the more he tries, the louder it gets. And I can’t help but join in and laugh as well.

I did, in fact, have a nanny growing up. When I tell the group, everyone leans in closer, elbows on the table. My sister and I were so chaotic, always up to no good. And our older brother had no intention of taking care of two identical twin girls that hated lorries and action figures. So our parents hired a nanny to keep us company Monday to Thursday from three to six PM. Belle and I were terrible, we would spend our evenings planning the worst tricks. Like that time we exchanged marmalade with meat sauce and that time we hid a stick of butter in the pocket of the nanny’s coat.

“I love this,” Clio comments, eyes wide and excited, “Tell me more about the family drama.”

And I’ve got enough beer in me to narrate every little detail of my Sunday dinner. The pub is warm and my cheeks are on fire, but I can’t stop talking. Purnell is holding my hand now, and Ali is leaning into my side. Joe and Clio are staring straight into my eyes, their gazes soft and understanding.

“So your Uncle Seymour’s gay, huh?”

“They were holding hands at the dinner table,” I confirm.

“Excuse your mouth? Under your mother’s roof?” Purnell is utterly scandalised and they’ve never met my mother, but they totally get it.

“Is he single?” Joe asks, and Clio grunts in exasperation.

“I need a ciggy.”

I am left alone with my pint, my girlfriend and too many thoughts. Ali links her fingers with mine and rests her forehead against mine. Our noses brush and her breath is warm against my lips. It’s sweet, like the soda she’s been drinking. I can’t wait to be in bed with her, can’t wait to be the little spoon and have her arms around me. When Ali hugs me it feels like home. Suddenly, I’m incredibly tired.

“Al?”

“Yes babe?”

“I love this glass,” I admit, apropos of nothing.

“I know you do, sweetie. You’ve nicked one already.”

“Have not. Have I?” I don’t remember at all. The room is spinning a little. How

many pints have I been drinking? This can’t be good for my liver. Oh, well. At least I’m not smoking.

Ali taps my palm. “Yes, you did. I had to bring it back the next day and apologise.”

“You returned the glass I’ve stolen?”

With a small nod comes Ali’s confirmation.

“You’re ridiculous,” I tell her.

“Yes, I am. But you really love me, right?”

Oh yes, I do. I love Ali because she makes me feel like I am in the right place, with the right people. No matter where we are, no matter who we are with.

When Clio, Joe and Purnell come back smelling like smoke and cold air, they have a slice of cake with them. I am extremely confused and I don’t even know where to begin asking questions. Where did they get this cake? It’s the middle of the night, we’re in the middle of nowhere, it’s winter. But I don’t have Clio’s super-gift, so I keep all the questions inside. Joe places the cake in the middle of the table and Clio winks at me, passing a spoon. Purnell is already talking about that orchid on their window that is determined to die, and Ali’s hand is warm on my knee.

Nobody tells me how much I’m supposed to eat. Nobody judges me for taking a bigger spoonful, nobody comments how better my trousers would fit if I just ate a little less cake, a little more protein. The five of us share the slice amicably, without giving it too much thought. Joe keeps talking about the Ex, Clio keeps asking poignant questions and Purnell starts painting their nails a light shade of blue, because it “Goes with Ali’s new hair.”

Ali is quiet, next to me. My breathing is synced up with hers and my heartbeat is slow and steady. Her fingers are still toying with mine, tracing random patterns. Till I realise it is not quite random.

A round one. O.

Four lines. M.

One line, then two. F? Ah, another line. E.

OME?

Then, two long lines and a bridge between them. H.

OMEH.

And back to the round one. O.

I put the pieces together, a little slower than I’m proud to admit.

I turn to look at Ali and she knows I know. She looks at me proudly and starts saying her goodbyes and her goodnights. I follow her lead, grabbing my jacket and offering my cheek to Clio and Joe. When I get to Purnell, they are beaming at me, a literal sunshine.

“Hey, B. It was great seeing you again, I was starting to miss you. I’m so happy you came along with Ali tonight, I’d love it if you joined us more often.” Purnell bumps their shoulder with mine and throws an arm around my shoulders, casually. Fondly. It brings tears to my eyes, how simple it is, with the right people.

“It was fun,” I say.

“Totes. Don’t make us miss you, sausage. Otherwise I’ll have to come pick you up at your house and I’ll have to force you to go shopping with us.”

Shopping? Why shopping? Oh lord, I hope they don’t mean that my jumper is ugly. I know it’s old, but it’s soft and it’s got little colourful dinosaurs, all species. We owe a lot to dinosaurs, they deserve more respect. This jumper deserves more respect, it’s my favourite.

I don’t know how much of that I’ve said outloud, but Purnell’s face tells me I’ve said enough. “I like shopping,” they say easily with a grin, “We could get ice-cream at the mall, sit on a bench and judge people.”

I don’t want to get my hopes up, but my hopes have a mind of their own. “I used to go all the time with my sister Belle. We used to play this game, ‘what’s in the shopping bag?’”

Purnell hugs me closer, eyes glistening. “Yes. That’s what I’m talking about. Guess what they bought and all.”

“What they’re having for dinner.” I nod.

“Sounds hilarious. Are you free next weekend?”

I don’t tell Purnell I’m free every weekend. I don’t tell them that I used to be very busy, used to have lots to do with my family. Cooking with Mom, gardening with Aunt Rosie, plotting pranks with Belle. I don’t need to tell Purnell why all of that changed, how I came to be so lonely. Purnell squeezes my shoulder and eventually drops a kiss to my cheek too.

“Night, B.”

Ali is waiting for me at the door. She can’t find the car keys in her bag, and she’s got a little bit of cream on the side of her lip. I wipe it away with my thumb and wrap my jacket around her. “Let’s go home.”

Outside, the night is still cold, still dark. That same bird is still hollering in the distance, beyond the line of trees.

“Wha’s this bir?” It’s the beer talking, I would never ask this question if I was sober. I’m so stupid, Ali’ll think I’m a total thicko. Who am I kidding, she already knows I am as dumb as a doorknob. And she still likes me. I soak in the thought.

Ali stops and thinks for a second, trying to make sense of my slurred words. Then, she stretches her neck long and listens carefully. At first, the night is completely silent. A soft breeze is blowing, the bare branches are creaking, the leaves are dropping to the ground and covering every single sound. After a beat, a rather long and rather scary screech reaches breaks the stillness. I jump, despite myself, but Ali is holding my hand tightly.

“This is an owl. Long-eared one, I think. I’ll show you a photo at home,” Ali says easily, and finally, she’s found the car keys. She pushes the button and unlocks it.

I exhale deeply before jumping in. In the distance, the long-eared owl hoots.





TOM BARREK

Tom (he/him) is a queer Berlin-born and based writer fascinated by character-driven narratives, witty dialogue, interpersonal dynamics and stories that actually respect the reader's intellect. He gets his biggest inspiration from video games and fashion. He's currently working on his debut novel following a swagless bisexual in Eastern Europe on his snark-filled journey of inner healing.

Go hound him on Instagram at @lettersfromtb and tell him what part of his piece resonated with you most.

SAM HEIKKILÄ

Sam (she/they) is a Finland-born queer hoping to be an author one day. Currently trying to sort their story ideas into something cohesive. Also, currently just trying.

MAIA GEORGE

Maia works with research institutions in Germany and Austria, helping researchers think more clearly, while considering herself a recovering academic at heart. Thus, she spends the rest of her time somewhere between thinking and feeling, and writing about what she finds there. She writes in English and German.

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FRANCESCA SCHICCHERA

Francesca breathes, momentarily, more deeply when inhaling a cigarette; one day she shall smoke her last.

JJ MAHAL

JJ Mahal (he/him) is a community organizer who lived in Berlin from 2022 to 2026. He organized events, helped build spaces, and learned from others.

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COLLIN

Collin (he/they) is a twenty-something queer guy whose main job is writing professionally, so the natural reaction was writing weird stuff in their down time. They are a fan of anything horror & crime as well as plucking on the most intricate strings that connect people until it hurts (the characters, the reader & the author themselves.) You can follow them on IG @collin.adm or on Bluesky fawnyed.bsky.social so they are forced to actually use it.

TOM

Tom attempts to untangle and write the human experience.

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Intellectualising minor inconveniences—reading the symptoms of contemporary life through histories structured by the logic of trauma.

EUN (SAM) SHIM 심은

Shim is a writer and a localization specialist based in Berlin. Shim has a background in 19th century British literature, and her interests range from matters of imperialism & race to science fiction, pop culture, and contemporary Korean media.

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GREGOR HAZEL

Gregor Hazel is a NYC born photographer and multidisciplinary artist known for their gentle navigation of body dysmorphia, erotic empowerment, and abject trauma in fringe communities. Whether in Boston, Berlin, or during residencies and exhibitions abroad, they explore unconventional methods and push the boundaries of traditional film portraiture with restraint and honesty.

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LARA A. SPRINGS

Lara A. Springs has been writing contemporary stories since a young age, when all she had was a pink notebook, messy handwriting and a big dream. As part of the queer community herself, her aim is to give visibility to queer love and narrate authentic yet inspirational experiences. She is currently writing a series around the Memory Loss trope, and her debut novel *Forgotten* is releasing May 2026. Born in Italy but based in Germany, Lara's guilty pleasure is an ice cold beer on a hot summer day.

You can follow her on Instagram at @laraasprings, or at laraasprings.com

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