

I have this recurring dream about a girl I knew once when new york city was brightly lit and pregnant and there wasn't enough time. She's gone now, along with the pieces of a shared summer she took with her. She fell asleep at the wheel somewhere in the midwest and I've been searching for her ever since. When I find her, it's usually in a dream where I'm not afraid to let her go.

I never remember saying goodbye. I can remember the way she held my head in her lap and how it felt to drive across the country as the rest of the world stayed still. I can recall the rhythm of her voice, the freckles in her irises and the way human beings feel when they sacrifice themselves. I just can't remember the finality of everything, the end of all things.

The dream isn't as much a fantasy as a combination of memories that have had their deepest colors filled in. I could try and see things differently but that's not why the heart loves what it does. To do so would be like returning to the house you grew up in only to discover the pool is filled with dead frogs instead of champagne, the front door cracked, as yellow and porous as sponge cake.

The dream starts in paris on cobblestones by a monument that's ugly and soberly neoclassical and frames the eiffel tower. There is blood on the ground in thick clotted drops by a shattered bottle of whiskey that stands out as a chimeric falsehood like the lights of the tower that skitter and pause and go on like petit mals.

A boy walks past with a girl, awkwardly, his hands in his pockets and he begs for courage his little heart can't summon to light a flame whose life source been inside him since he can always remember. But there is only a mirror adjacent in this quiet, raging moment of despair and intimacy and the vulnerability shared weeps into the sidewalk and the gray and boring colors of paris melt into some monstrosity of love. And then he kisses her.

She looks at him, eyes wide, and they are sure of something, of the hands they hold at least, because the future is measured in growth and fixed calculations and the

goals are laid out in front of them and all they have to do is match. She says his name, softly, the way she will say it on the edge of her bed, wearing a Michigan shirt. He tells himself he should stop caring so much.

* * * * *

A man with a roman nose and a painter's coat steps into the subway car, holding his daughter. She's four years old and she asks questions and squeezes his ear with her fingers. The boy can't stop looking because for a moment, it's as if he is the father and the child he is holding is--

* * * * *

The walk from the subway to the small three story walk-up is long but he never notices because he's floating through a snow globe of white sheets and christmas lights and even though he's only known her for a little while his heart is wrapped around the corners and alcoves of her french apartment like a snake and that's a good feeling.

Upstairs they have their own language and nobody else can understand and he wonders what would happen if it were to disappear and the globe should crack, glass breaking off in iceberg chunks, oil forming glittery tributaries that give way to hundreds of thousands of heavenly confluences. And the flame that's started will never go away now that it has reared its ugly head but the pain is years away so he walks barefoot across the tile floor past the space heater into the kitchen and starts to boil water.

Later they hold each other, bodies twisted and twining like design and she tells him about her family and sometimes he can't pay attention because he's never listened to a human being like her breathe before. She laughs and the sound skips through his heart like forest fire and she looks into his eyes again and he has never been so happy. She twitches as she drifts off to sleep and he loves the feeling of something shutting itself off in his arms.

* * * * *

Years have passed and he remembers how she smiled when he surprised her coming back to america and how they laid in piles of clothes and they were feverish with the absence of responsibility.

* * * * *

It's his birthday. The night is warm and he tries to hold her hand across the table. The waiter stops to take their order, sees their faces, smiles. "Of course, you two are in love." He walks away.

It's their second. He remembers romeo and juliet and broken hearts and broken strings and other things. She wants to know what the girl in drunken paris was about and shames his fingers for their adolescent faults and he asks about her hands in new trier freshman year and madrid and what all that meant.

There is so much anger and fear in things so fragile and precious and unique and they are one and the same for everything they have done. The girl touches his face and soon she is lying on his back and they patch up their wounds together and forgive and they carry on and drink from the same oasis and set the water aside for when they will need it in the future.

* * * * *

He holds the pillow so tight when he sleeps.

* * * * *

They sit atop a car beside a colonial museum, looking down the road towards a small town of fog and light that sits beside a gravel factory. They wait for the fireworks that don't come and the rain picks up and the blanket they sit on gets wet and the air begins to crackle as if something were smoldering and he wishes he could be the dark italian boy he thinks she has always wanted because then things would be different and there would be no everests to climb.

Thunder sounds and it smells of deet and lemon and he can't accept this because he remembers exactly what she said as the cars passed by so fast on the side of the

highway and he thinks it's all his fault and he never meant for monsters and he knows that nothing will ever be the same again.

* * * * *

The names of their children are carmela and anthony and maria and his son is the youngest and he holds him like a potato sack slung over his shoulder in giggles. The three girls are on a separate side of the fence because they are his and he would do anything for them.

* * * * *

It's fall at a fair in massachusetts and the grays and the alien culture and the embrace of parisian rain and timeless art that are no more to him than bottle blue dolphins that sit fuzzy on the prize rack are gone. Something hovers in the air fatidic and unnamed and the same boy holds the same hand, the way he does when waking from a dream in an open universe.

They walk from stand to stand and he wins her a black and white tiger and its eyes are too close together and a fake chairman of the board sings siren songs. The boy notices a couple beside a pretzel stand and suddenly can't watch because to him it should be between two people who love each other.

* * * * *

She leads him up the stairs, squeezes his hand. The neighbors knock on the wall and he knows what it's like to be thought of when you're not around.

* * * * *

Teenagers squat in groups around the zipper and its flashing lights are similar to paris because in the dream everything is. Some cry in the metal harnesses and others giggle at the ring-a-bottle stand where no one wins and the missing ones are holding back hair in the bathroom and spilling inaudibles and diet coke into toilets while their mothers wait by the phone. The rings bounce off the emerald bottles and a man in a sweat stained v-neck scoffs and rubs his mustache and says "two dollas for twenty, fifty fer four."

The girl leaves to go to the bathroom and thoughts of purple and green and days of the week make him unexpectedly hopeless and he walks into a show barn and watches chicks hatch out of egg shells in embryonic dances of blindness. He thinks about leaving and the ugly screaming and he can't explain to anybody that he will hurt more than anyone and carry the zeroes and scar and pick and bleed and the coagulating advice that everyone gave him will fail.

* * * * *

How can I hold you in my arms when I don't know where you are? How can I believe you when you say it means nothing but to me it means all things?

* * * * *

He is so afraid that she will share everything with everyone else but him. And he has offered himself unprotected and without in a way unique only to her and it breaks his heart that she won't do the same. And the truth remains invisible and love that could carry ships through storms is so near in the mist and everyone else in the world seems to have what he wants when they don't.

The incubator shades everything a school bus yellow. People huddle around him, watching the creatures and it ruins the moment. He leaves, dragging with him the scent of pigs and miniature ponies that he didn't notice. He waits for the girl as she steps out of the makeshift shack and he documents the walk, remembering the steps in case they are the last.

* * * * *

At night all that is left are the memories that burn out like stars and I wish I hadn't found something so beautiful. Everything else seems empty.

* * * * *

She is by the beekeeping hut, trying to order muscat tea because caffeine makes her anxious and she needs something to soothe her throat. The smell of grapes reminds him that he has never wanted to be a part of anything more than he does now.

She talks about cake and eating it too and waiting for life to get simple like her great grandmother who made a patchwork quilt that glowed in the candlelight before everything changed when their bodies were in states of flux and they fell asleep in the light because the dark was a place where they didn't have each other. She tells him it's just so hard and that she wants it to be easy and he loves her more than anything and he hopes she knows that.

* * * * *

The rain won't stop. It's simple, the sound of it on a sunday morning before the sun has risen while she sleeps beside him. There is no need for them to offer up sacrifice on a sunday while it rains before the world has started and he listens to her breathe, like he always has.

* * * * *

They watch as children weave strings of wax in swirls of die and candle after candle after candle is born. The italian man sings about being strange in the night even though there is nothing strange about it, only strangers and acquaintances who fast for connections in hexagon shaped huts and sand castles and haunted houses.

She stands, dumps the tea out. Stares at the candles. They are both asking for something they don't have and neither of them can withstand its absence much longer. Soon everything will collapse and dissolve like the dream itself. But for just this one night, being happy is better.

* * * * *

They built paris on a cake. Everything was there. Everyone who had ever hurt them, everything that had ever made them stay up at night. All the caches and colors and ideas that made them who they were. It was too pretty to eat and they never tasted it.

* * * * *

He leads her towards a haunted house. The october moon is as petite as the sliver of hair that hangs from her forehead in a painting she hid away in her basement and he takes her inside and squeezes her hand from time to time as men in masks bang on

plastic and a fake clown cries blood and the boy swears he sees the fading embers of an artificial menorah.

They exit crisply into night and decide on the house of mirrors next and she is everywhere. She runs off giggling and he reaches out and smears the glass with his clammy hands until she disappears and suddenly he misses her more than ever.

He follows her shadow upstairs and sees the compressed image of a boy with hollow eyes in a mirror. She takes his hand and they become elongated string beans in the glass and she kisses him and tells him she would die for him and his heart is beating fast and the lights are off and somebody's waving a flashlight.

* * * * *

The garden is quiet. Outside, it's snowing. In a few days it will be Christmas, again. He hates that he burns himself over and over again, the same way, the same flame. He watches her walk away and he documented the steps because they were the last.

* * * * *

Back at his house they walk across cold red-bricked cement, dragging blankets up wooden stairs into a room with all the lights turned off. She tells him she wants to make a fort and he stops yawning because he never feels tired when they are alone, night after night until the rest of his life. They do unexplainable things that only happen and he is full of something that almost means everything now because the half-life is coming to a head.

She cries. There is a story in a newspaper wrapped around a ceramic rose of how babies suck their thumbs to mimic being in-utero. And he squeezes hers, hoping that she will feel safe because he doesn't and he prays for at least one. She points her finger somewhere she can't see because he reminds her so much of fear slinking down stairs and his lack of self-worth is incarceration and in the end what's the point when it won't feel like anything anyway.

* * * * *

They fall asleep and awake from time to time and pretend that none of it mattered, that none of it will last, that none of it was real.

* * * * *

She has her back to him, fingers tracing the outlines of her pillow. She tells him that he will miss her and there are no other girls like her and he just wants her to know that she's all he's ever wanted, ever will want, and years later he is afraid he is as much hers as anything she's ever looked at and her box of keepsakes sits untouched by a gooseneck lamp because if he opened it they would eat him alive.

In sleepless nights in the future when the moon is out and there is nothing but time she will rest her head on his chest and sigh and they are right for each other.

When he doesn't reply, she grabs the hand and places it over her hip and he can feel the bone and she asks what's wrong in a hoarse voice but she already knows the answer because the smallest deaths are always the worst.

There is a silence; breathing slow, labored, heavy and I want to tell you that no one has ever made being alive so good.

She asks him if he remembers the time they spent the night in his bed before they were together. He says yes because he slept on his arms so she had all the room she needed and right now it's the only thing he's sure of.

But she is here and he holds her and says goodbye six days later even though it was supposed to be forever and he can't determine whether he is enslaved to something that can't be or the property of someone who used to love him but he is glad that it happened.

She goes on, eyes still closed, telling him how his hand touched her breast in the morning when he woke and he wants to hear it for the rest of his life and the loss is slow, worse by every moment. If she had to do it again, she says, he could touch her anywhere on her body because she would always be his.

* * * * *

Every time he walks through the streets of new york he sees a paris or a barcelona. A bedroom with no light. A cafe that's a sentence and parks that are jumbled words and gardens of unfinished books. Every red and green coat, a girl with dark hair that makes his heart stop.

* * * * *

The fire burns his forehead and he wakes. He looks around the room. At the floral art hanging by the ceiling, her name scribbled on it. At the stuffed animals he feels bad for deserting as a child. He thinks of outlets and plugs as lifelike as the flames and he can't understand why he was the only one, even if he was.

Without everests, what would be the point?

He whispers in her ear and says he would suffer anything for her inside and out and the words escape her in sleep, unraveling like balls of yarn. And the flames are right there in front of him like a set of mirrors angled to repeat infinitely like the image of the boy in paris and the feeling is as wrenching as anything he ever knew to exist because this wasn't how it was supposed to be. He stares at her, the girl he has fallen in love with, and she opens her eyes and smiles and he realizes she's forgotten who he is and at last he can tell she's happy.

* * * * *

I wish I had opened the windows when I left for Africa. I heard your footsteps in the courtyard, I saw you walk down the street, my letter in your hand. I felt my heart drift further and further away, felt the loss-- something I have never gotten back. I'm all grown up. Our dream was over and I wish I had opened the flat windows and broken the french rules.

I wish I had said I love you. I wish you could have known everything. I wish we could have been ready. That things had been different. I wish a lot of things. But mostly, that I had opened those windows.

Somewhere, the roads stop merging and the sun hides itself beneath a forest of pitch pine, casting a pale and violet light on a highway overpass in ohio. Here the dream ends, the loop closes. I am alone with her before the world starts, sunday in the rain.

Her eyes are open, fixed on me and our existence slowly gives way to oblivion. There is a last gasp as we fight for each other, flesh and blood, living and not. We have made each other feel like we are here, involved, no matter the others who have stumbled across the same. Ours is its own entity, a celestial apple in an orchard of chaos.

Soon, she will go and the boy will walk the endless dream with someone who doesn't exist anymore but right now it doesn't matter because he is with her and will always be, no matter how many dreams, how many years. He will rest there because it is the way he keeps the flame lit. It is the way he holds on to mirages of a girl in cities across oceans and freckled eyes of green and brown because this is how he loves, unconditioned and always.

I close my eyes and listen to her body. I feel her heartbeat in my chest. Every moment, every ion, absorbed as an airplane passes by overhead. A faint hum of a song growing louder and louder and when I open my eyes she's asleep on the pavement, flashing lights and all.