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Compendium

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Compendium

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Sara Manlowe

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

482. Girl in village followed by angels/aliens, cobalt/lime green/fuchsia/white light/gold stars; Pied Piper constellation woman story who turns children into luminescent yellow-white foam, into stars who dance around her on frozen lake, red blue green stars bloom under skin, mysterious illness, main character sees woman's body is a constellation through telescope, nerves bursting like stars spreading/blooming under skin

§

10.

For Mark Griffiths, Head of the Medieval Department at New College, Oxford, on October 16, 2019:

Pearl and Perfection

A central focus of the medieval poem *Pearl* is perfection; 'my precious pearl without a spot' (1.4.48), 'that gem so clean' (1.4.47) – the titular pearl is rarely mentioned without some corresponding description of its flawlessness. The language describing the Pearl-Maiden both echoes and elevates this divine perfection: 'Like glistening gold that one does shear, / So shone that gem on distant shore' (2.14.165-66). She is described in terms of jewels, and light. There is no human element that is not countered by its descriptor, 'faultless face' (2.15.169), for example. The reader's first image of her is 'a child...enshrined' (2.14.161), which carries less of life in it than it does a pale, frozen statue surrounded by beauty. The girl herself is almost incidental; she is only an extension of this dazzling radiance, a sun in the shape of a girl. Perfection, then, through the Pearl-Maiden, is equated to the lack of anything human. She is perfect because she resembles a flawless pearl; she is perfect because, as she is assumed to be the dreamer's dead daughter, she died before the world could mark her in any way; she is perfect because her humanity is dead. The Pearl-Maiden's divine perfection hinges upon her lack of resemblance to any real, living woman. Therefore, the perfect woman is made perfect by not being a woman.

It is largely her descriptors that make her a thing, and not a person: 'Then that girl, so quick to enthrall, / So smooth, so small, slender and straight / ...a precious pearl in pearls ornate' (2.16.189-93). 'Girl' is a human term, but any humanity conferred upon her is quickly robbed by the following line. Smooth, small, slender and straight could as easily apply to an inanimate object as a person. A pearl, in fact – as the line, 'a precious pearl in pearls ornate' equates the Pearl-Maiden to the inanimate objects she is wearing. She is an extension of her beautiful clothes. She is her appearance; there is no warmth to her, nothing living. That list of descriptors – smooth, small, straight, slender – 'is equally appropriate to the description of the jewel and of feminine beauty' (Kean, 13); thus, according to Kean, descriptors that work equally well for inanimate objects are *appropriate* for describing beauty in women – that is the baseline, the expectation. Smooth, small, straight and slender are all visual terms: nothing moving in them, nothing breathing, nothing thinking. The Pearl-Maiden is 'something more...truly a pearl by virtue of the jewel-box that holds her. On earth, this was the buried coffin' (Boitani, 100). Boitani goes further to say that it is her surroundings that elevate the Pearl-Maiden into a pearl herself. This is the ultimate passivity: being defined solely by one's surroundings. It is through this passivity that she is made 'something more'; the ideal woman is an inverse equation, who becomes more the lesser she is.

The buried coffin was her jewel box on earth, defining her, making her more. Death, as it drains life, is a perfecting influence.

Then there is the aspect of virginity, of being untouched, and therefore unblemished. On earth, the dreamer's daughter died at only two years of age. The dreamer uses this fact to question the Pearl-Maiden's elevation in heaven, but 'the maiden counters by emphasizing the spotless state conferred on her at baptism which, unlike adults, she has not had time to mar; it is this conferred innocence that gives her a place of honor in heaven' (Bhattacharji, 38). Life, here, is made negative, labelled 'time to mar' one's spotless innocence. The more life one has lived, the farther they stray from that pristine condition gained through baptism. Life is a tainting influence; dying young renders one virtually flawless. The Pearl-Maiden is 'the emblem of an individual soul who is saved by her own innocence and acquires the perfection and incorruptibility of a pearl' (Boitani, 101). Her innocence saves her: innocence, here, can be defined as lack of knowledge, lack of experience, thus it is that lack, that emptiness, that once again elevates the Pearl-Maiden to perfection. She has done nothing, seen nothing, been nothing, and for that she is raised high. Death ensured she was nothing, not a person, and thus death ensured her perfection.

Therefore the ideal woman is dead: on earth, a corpse, and in heaven less a woman than a glowing statue. She is able to speak, as she cannot on earth, but even then her will is not her own. She is a vessel for God's message. As God's bride, she describes herself as 'Purchased from earth' (15.75.893): her perfection allows her to be used transactionally. Then, when the dreamer asks to see her city, he says, 'Since you are glorious, without any gall, / To refuse my request you are not prone' (16.77.915-16). Since she is so glorious – since she was able to die, untouched, on earth – she is not prone to refuse his request. Because she has become the perfect woman, the dreamer tells her she is unable to refuse him. The perfect woman is a beautiful object with no will of her own, so this is a perfectly reasonable assumption, and indeed she does end up giving him a glimpse of the city. Her objectification is so complete that throughout their conversation, the dreamer is able to '[insist] on her infancy...and his possessive love for her' (Kean, 119). Even as God's bride, even as someone who has transcended humanity to become perfection itself, the dreamer still feels that he owns her; that, for all her divine perfection, she is still a woman, still an object, still someone a mortal man feels he has a right to own.

A corpse has no free-will; a corpse is an object. On earth, this is the most perfect a woman can become, for she is capable of being a vessel, moved and interpreted by others. It is in heaven, however, that a woman can achieve divine perfection, a perfect hollowing-out of personhood. Dying young is ideal; by dying young and knowing nothing, a woman wins the right to be purchased by God, to become a vessel for his message, to have nothing at all of her own self inside of her. A child enshrined, with faultless face, a precious pearl in pearls ornate; there is no warmth here, no breath, nothing remotely resembling a human being. In her divinity, the Pearl-Maiden is no longer human. Perhaps this is less about women than it is about divinity. Since her perfection stems from her inhumanity, one can infer that divinity is the opposite of humanity. One becomes closer to God by becoming beautiful, and empty. Yet the dreamer still feels he has a hold on her. He still feels that she has no right to refuse him

his requests, nor does he hesitate when challenging her position in heaven. He listens to her explanations because she speaks with the messages of God, but he feels able to question her, to confront her, to doubt her, because as a perfect woman, she has become a glistening object.

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This might have been the essay where my Oxford professor told me I was so wrong he almost laughed while reading it. He then explained to me, as he did every time, the historical context that made my argument irrelevant. When it was my turn to speak again, I said, as I always said, “I still don’t think I’m wrong,” and we’d end, as we always did, at an impasse.

If medieval stories are meant to stay in the past, and can only be understood there, then why read them now at all, is what I never said to him.

On that day I think I talked about robots and Instagram, which might have been why I lost him so quickly, but the point I was making was that we have always sought to perfect female bodies. Instagram filters that remove pores; smooth, perfectly hairless women in magazines; the female shame associated with hunger, and consumption, and having any bodily functions whatsoever. The *Pearl* poem so struck me because of this language of smooth whiteness, purity unmarred by *living*, that has endured in countless iterations throughout the centuries.

The perfect woman is an image of a woman with no concession to her humanity.

§

Excerpt of *Sea of Thieves*, 2021

“This,” says La Jongleuse, seated backwards and upside down on a rotting tavern chair between two frilly pillars of kelp, “is a ridiculous story.”

Across the table, the thief is hunched in green brocade, sequined and salt-crusted, the color of slime in ships’ entrails. She whispers, though La Calenture is empty but for her and the pantalooned fool, “I haven’t started yet.”

“You said it was a tall tale.”

“I ordered *salt ale*.”

La Jongleuse’s spidery hands clasp an imaginary lute, strike invisible chords on invisible strings. “*O sing to me, muse, a most towering tale / of one copper-haired thief and her cup of salt ale* – that’s consonance, so you know, and beseeching the muse harks back to ancient tradition, which is a clever trick – why do you look as if you’re about to be sick? I prefer coins as payment, easier to sweep into a pocket, less...*wet*.”

“Not necessarily,” says the copper-haired thief, and then shakes herself. “I mean – you shouldn’t sing of me.”

“Or what? *Miséricorde à minuit*? Dear girl, even la guillotine would dance if it heard me sing.” The thief chokes politely on her salt ale. Still hoarse, she says, “There’s something you should know.”

La Jongleuse’s pointy-toed shoes slide to the floor with a sticky-sounding *shlap*.

All at once the fool is sitting upright, and instead of a face, the thief is gazing into the mass of motley ribbon dangling from the brim of the fool’s plumed velvet hat.

Then two hands, recently plucking at a nonexistent lute, reach up and part the ribbons with a flourish, revealing a long nose at the center of a moon-pale face. Tendrils of black hair curlicue to either side.

Eyes, mussel-black and scimitar-sharp, mirth flashing in their depths like silver coins, fix upon the thief with a sudden intensity. “I am only a fool by occupation. I know the Spinning Court hunts you – the alchemists decoct you by quicksilver and seafoam, the spiral priests speak your death in stanzas over spiral rosaries, L’Ordre des Entrailles Sanglantes seeks you with little blades inside infant beasties – yet you are here, in this corpse of a tavern, choking on salted ale, begging wisdom off a fool.”

“Only by occupation,” says the thief dully, and half-toasts the empty air.

“What they will do to you when they catch you, even I would shudder to sing.”

“My thanks.”

“Oh, not out of respect. To hear how La Dame d’Enfer flayed your muscles into red petticoats might put people off their drinks, which I am not paid for. Or how she fermented you whole into sweet ritual wine, or packed your mouth full of salt and stitched it shut, or – you’ll enjoy this – took a live squid, and-”

“I thought you preferred getting paid in coin,” says the thief, who is looking rather green beneath her freckles.

“Coin,” says La Jongleuse, shrugging in a wide, practiced motion that makes her sleeves billow outwards like two sails. “And stories, to feed my poesy. Though, should some Spinning Court lout interrupt us halfway through, I can only promise to sing you a tasteful funeral dirge as they drag you away with a butcher’s hook through both your feet. That happened, once. The poor boy sobbed all the way to the door – ’twas my song moved him to tears.”

“You’re too kind,” says the thief, whose name is Milou.

La Jongleuse props her elbows upon the greasy table, and her head upon her hands, and gazes at Milou. The wavering tavern light gives the fool’s eyes the dizzying appearance of stars twirling under black water; Milou is struck by the mad sensation that the entirety of La Jongleuse’s face is a stage, and in drawing the ribbons back from her features she has drawn the curtains for a play.

The fool says, “Go on. Tell me a story.”

§

485. Monk/priest/monastery artist (your business is to paint the souls of men, not their bodies)(or men’s bodies, not their souls?) dying in monastery and can’t tell if they’re already dead or not because they’re laying in dark room w arms folded over chest, eats relics to become holy, eats book of saints, pray horses up out of the ground (cleric-y loophole that means every prayer must be answered, prayer

like directing symphony/army), possibly combine with saint roasting and eating dragon, I'm a saint and I'm eating what killed me, possibly combined w 487/486, will ye ever eat my heart, darksome, weal 486. Angels crowded into church, her mind flooded with angels and split open, angelic possession, angels occupy spaces, your head becomes the cathedral and angels flood in, possibly combine w 485

§

9.

I have a list of six-hundred stories. Its existence means every self-portrait I might make that does not contain all six-hundred is automatically obsolete.

I have to write them because I don't know how to code video games(which would be my second choice, for their aesthetic and narrative qualities), and I'm not good enough at painting. I would prefer to psychically transmit them via synesthetic flashes instead of words; words are only really the next best thing when I don't fall into the trap of easy sentences, which I often do.

Will this be interesting? I don't know. I love these stories so much that I wouldn't die for them, and that I would choose to be a brain in a laptop keyboard rather than accept my natural end, if it meant I could write a little longer. (M doesn't like when I talk like this, because I am in essence saying I would abandon him, and admitting that to my writing, he is obsolete, because I do not write from that kind of life. He says my writing is like a third person in the room sometimes, and I think that's the person he doesn't like, and finds cold, though he also loves me for my writing and calls me a genius. He's a book person, so he likes the conceit of dating a writer who is a genius, and as I am a writer, I like the conceit of dating a book person who thinks I am a genius. In this way, we serve each other's ends. We are both a little bit pleased when he is upset at how cold I can be, because the notion of narrative as a fracture in a relationship is itself a narrative fracture. I can't tell if this shared attribute will be what breaks us up, eventually, or what will ensure that we remain together forever.)

§

Excerpt of *L'Isle Dernière*, 2020; M's birthday present

Alraune breathes, deeply, and when her heart has settled back into a steady rhythm, she says, "Your nurse has half the estate looking for you. Won't you go to her, and lay her mind at ease?"

Alette finally succeeds in catching Ales, and the two children collapse in a heap of spring-tinted pinafores. They are giggling so hard she thinks they might not have heard her; now that she looks at them she is not at all sure which one is which. To watch them tussle atop the Tale of Genji one might almost believe that fairy tale in which a lonely child's reflection steps out of the mirror to play with them, except that one child is dressed in lavender and rose, and the other in sky-blue and silver.

Alraune opens her mouth once more, aware that she has no real authority over the twins, but before she can speak the child in lavender – Ales? – looks up at her and says, as though it is a pre-set part of their play, "Papa has a box that breathes."

Alette says, "Mama has a key that blinks."

"This house is a meadow, but nobody sees."

"The jewels on the walls are insects' eyes."

"Alette drowned once in the dining room-"

“Ales used to play in the paintings until the green shadow chased him away-”

“Have you seen it, mademoiselle?”

“Did you know that it is always spring on this isle?”

“Have you seen that green shadow in the walls?”

“Mama’s key is in her jewelry box, and do you know what it unlocks?”

“What have you seen, mademoiselle?”

Together their voices make a high-pitched chorus, and they say again, “*What have you seen, mademoiselle?*”

Alraune is momentarily distracted from answering when she notices that the twins are lying atop the kingfisher painted on the floor. Turquoise wings. Melting heart. She raises her eyes to the opposite wall, where the Tale of Genji unfurls in livid reds and pinks and greens. She could have sworn the kingfisher was on the wall, and the Tale of Genji on the floor. Try as she might, she cannot recall them moving. Paintings do not move, in any case.

The twins are tugging at the hem of her apron.

“Mademoiselle,” they ask, “what have you seen?”

She is sure this is the cue for a story. *I dream of emerald eyes*, she thinks of saying. *In my dreams the paintings move. In my dreams there is a faceless stranger all in green, and we waltz through all the worlds painted in the walls of this house.*

Both twins’ eyes are on her, chlorine-blue, the blue of pearls underwater, unblinking. The kingfisher beneath them is so life-like she could almost imagine it lifting them into the air.

Alraune’s lips have barely formed the word “I-” when another voice uncoils out of the doorway behind her, a voice that slinks.

It says, “When I was quite a bit younger I used to walk through the walls, and play with the painted toys, and dance with the painted dancers, and ride on the backs of all the animals. The portraits used to speak to me. I explored all the palaces in the Swan Suite, and all the red seas in the Nightjar Gallery, and all the watercolor villages in the Peregrine Wing – until I had walked so far into the walls I could not find my way out. To survive, I drank gold-leaf water, and nibbled at painted feasts, which is why all the estate’s paintings of food have bites missing. I was terrified I would become a painted girl – that my parents would one day find me frozen in oil paint in some lonely hall where no girl had been painted before, and they would say, doesn’t that look like our missing daughter? And in their grief they would watch me for hours while all the while I was trapped in my own image trying to tell them with the dots of white painted in my eyes that I had been real, once...and then I stumbled out of the silk meadows on the seventh floor, starving and sick from eating paint, and now my parents tell the story of eccentric Severine who went missing for a week when she was only a child, who ever since could not bear to look upon the murals...”

§

490. Lives in someone’s heart as house, red mansion, hot chambers, traverses corridors of veins, sprites/daimons

493. Edwardian magician summoning star to take up residence in her heart on marshes, pond scum
royalty, voice in marsh keeps asking for her hand in marriage, green

494. Gideon the 9th/cultists consume a part of their god each day but actually god is bread baked by
skilled baker, all a scam

495. Rose/gold/ivory, space, baroque, guard woman sees rose symbol everywhere, bleeds it, in stars,
galaxies, under microscope, hologram, trying to find it, losing mind

497. The stars bring a gift to the Last University

§

8.

I don't think this is honesty. Something happens when I write, some alchemy, that transmutes words
into story. I'm trying to be honest, but I am telling a story. I think that I don't think in words to begin
with.

And anyway I wouldn't write something that wasn't narratively sound, so any truth is story-truth.

I'm a fantasy writer: everything I write is fantasy. Everything I see becomes fantasy. I am a walking lens,
a sieve, and everything that passes through me becomes fantasy.

By definition I am lying right now, because this is a theatrical phrase, and I don't actually believe there
is a binary. I say these things *because I'm telling a story*, which is the truth.

My maths professor said, "They made the mistake of adding god into their equations," referring to
some arithmetic school in the Middle Ages, using god to mean infinity, which means $2 + \text{god} = 3 + \text{god}$
 $= \text{anything} + \text{god}$, so numbers are still numbers but they function like words in the sense that two can
actually equal three if you put it in the right story, the right story being in the context of god.

That's what I mean when I say that I'm lying, and also what I mean when I say this is true. It's true
because it's not false, but it's false because I don't think I think in words.

In elementary school – Burma and Sri Lanka – I didn't understand why I'd so often get in trouble for
'lying,' because I knew what I'd said was more interesting than the truth.

§

Excerpt of Lovelock, 2019

Our ship was the Lovelock and there were four of us to excavate the angel: Bellarmine, all in gold;
Rostival, our holy man; Miette, the chemist, with acid-green hair and safety pins along the rims of her
ears; and me, the painter, self-taught from monastery walls and bacteria specimens speckled like
galaxies under glass.

Where we were going – the mirror at the top of the world that was the Arctic Sea, and from there into
the unknowable cartography of the angel itself – there was nothing so simple as a survival rate, and
nothing, of course, so simple as survival; because it is impossible, Rostival said once, to quantify reports
of explorers turned to fractals on a cellular level, spiraling ever inwards, with a kind of cancer that
makes you endless; research assistants choking to death on candlelight; the crackle and hum of
scientific instruments transmuted to the sort of hymns that cause a woman to carve votives of her own
bones until her heart explodes.

Miette thought the angel was a kind of mushroom – something about how the cells we saw in the biology department of another angel they dissected a long time ago looked like an unholy marriage of wood blewits and honey trumpets and pink oysters, with cell walls made of chitin. I didn't tell her what I saw under the eye of the microscope: that each rectangular cell was a little picture like a painted icon in pink and green and gold, spelling out the story of a prophet who looked like me, who went to the Arctic to do something more complicated than die.

And Bellarmine believed in nothing. She thought the angels were just animals, named under a common heading due to mass-hysteria in the scientific community. Their manifestations looked nothing like one another, after all – one had been a pool of opalescent ectoplasm like a moon you could drink, one had been a circle of fuchsia eyes and silver fire – the only thing they shared among them was the fact that they were the size of cities, and seemed to be dead, though death, again, did not prevent the reports of cold water pouring from wounds instead of blood, or researchers' eyes bursting into ivory feathers. Bellarmine would only believe in divinity when she could cut it with a scalpel, as though divinity were a second heart the biologists kept missing, or the glint of a pearl buried amidst entrails that she, wrist-deep in a torso, could pluck up with forceps and admire beneath the sterile laboratory light.

§

502. Possessed by something every time she sings, cry and cry every time, over the love/siren song, Zelda Fair/flapper era, drifts dangerously close to inhumanity when she sings, heartbreaking, singer/performer with something in her, she's 'witched' or something, whenever she sings powerful force almost possesses her, seems to move through her, inhuman, audiences sob and are transfixed, she spends lots of time in the bath, often vanishes and is found walking out to sea in a trance, when powerful force takes over her body, stands on surface of bathwater, agent/mother so stressed about her doing it in front of trendy Gatsby fiancé, gentlemen don't like girls walking on water

§

7.

Ever since I was in high school, I would wake up at 5 a.m. so I could write. If I was writing something scary, I would leave the lights off and make myself so viscerally terrified I would sometimes dread those mornings, but I'm still impressed by the way I wrote fear, then. (I don't do that anymore – sacrifice myself to something to write it. But I also haven't written horror in a while.)

I explain to M that I have to wake up so early because however many hours I'm awake before noon is the number of hours I get to write. The later it gets, the more the fog blunts the sharp edges of my mind. I make a standing desk, if I can, and face a window – both tricks to keep myself awake longer.

M said if he didn't know me, I would sound crazy, like some kind of fanatic. This sounds like an insensitive thing to say but he meant it only as an observation, which is itself a compliment.

I suppose that the way I live around my writing is a ritual, like prayer. I suppose I am channeling something through my mind that isn't me.

When I was a child, I had different rituals, stricter rules for myself.

My entire childhood before sixth grade, I couldn't get up from my bed more than three times in a night, otherwise I was free game for whatever wanted to take me. If there were any odd speck or discoloration in my food, that was a poisoning attempt, presumably from whatever would have taken me in the night, and I would congratulate myself on leaving it untouched. When my family went camping, my mother would sprinkle a ring of salt around my tent so I could sleep. I had a litany of chants I would perform in my head, if I saw something I wanted, or something I feared. I lied to my classmates about my age, my address, regretting that they knew my real name. Certain phrases and objects were codes: whenever someone spoke one of these phrases, or whenever I saw these certain objects, I understood that whatever had planted these messages was attempting to communicate with me.

I knew how to read symbols; I took my synaesthesia as glimpses of the truth.

I understood that I was always being watched, and in the years of this understanding my life felt both surreal and hyperreal, a bubble that existed within reality but never made contact with the outside.

Then I turned twelve and it all stopped overnight. Perhaps because I made friends at school.

I rarely remember the fact that I lived the first twelve years of my life convinced I was a handful of everyday actions away from some terrible fate; I don't know if I actually thought I would die if I swallowed one of those poison flecks in my dinner, but I know that my ability to dodge every trap was part of the game. My ability to foresee these traps was akin to *their* ability to set traps, and to place symbols in my path. Harm was never the point, I don't think; the point was the back and forth, the interpretation. The point was that I knew what the world was trying to tell me.

I could never envision what I perceived to be after me, or even what I imagined might happen if I slipped up. My actions were born less out of fear than practicality. I think I must have these rules for myself still, now, but I can't see them so starkly.

Clinically, we can say this is a tendency to act on compulsions – the same compulsions that make me endlessly irritated by the fact that my fingers and toes are all different lengths, or make me retrace my writing into illegibility just to ensure each letter is symmetrical.

This is why it was so easy for me to starve, because starving on purpose is just following a set of rules. India broke down my convictions that the world was trying to tell me something, and is perhaps the reason I am repulsed from writing about myself. If I were to discover that I made a good subject, I would have to confront the fact that I matter.

§

Excerpt of Homunculus, 2019

I am, as it were, a made thing: my alchemist's brain in a flask.

Inside my alembic I dance without cease, and outside the window Prague shivers as though she were made of water. My alchemist has told me a saying among the common people: that the angels never left Prague, but went instead into the architecture. Bowed heads in cupolas, the curve of wings in an archway, a wet gleam on the cobblestones in the shape of a figure alight; laughing faces in blue fountains and long iron spires of celestial spines. Me, spinning, eternal, inside glass. Perhaps I am architecture. Perhaps I am an angel.

These are not words, but movements of my dance. I cannot tell a story; I cannot think in parallel lines. I flicker, but I am not fire. My alchemist pulled me from her chest, or I surfaced from her throat, and was born from the wet redness of her mouth.

§

520. Incantation erases all sorrow, fed a golden liquid, whole orphanage on brink of void/abyss, as chosen sacrifices, unknowing contractees, main character indoctrinated, can feel no sorrow, a life without longing is more terrifying than death itself, blue and gold ribbons of angels (winding up to the sky)

§

6.

- When I was maybe thirteen I misstepped in a flooded river and got swept downstream and pinned under a branch.
- At maybe fourteen, on a narrow road in the Himalayas, a truck nearly knocked my bike off the mountain and into the clouds beneath the peak.
- That same year, on a beach with nothing to read, I purposefully walked into my own mind to pass the time, except I went too far, and on instinct did the only thing I could think of to bring myself back, which was to drag tweezers up and down my wrists. South India is too hot for long sleeves, so the best I could do was develop a habit of turning my arms inward when I walked. Still, it was months later before my parents noticed one evening as I was brushing my teeth. They both cried. My mom said, “People would think we’re bad parents.”

Would think.

As in, from the outside this looked bad, but it actually wasn’t, since it was me, and I did, after all, read disturbing comics and write horror stories, so this proclivity for tweezers was only a natural extension of their daughter’s personality. It wasn’t bad, because it was *me*.

- In a rainbow-walled hostel in Amsterdam, in the middle of the night, a grown man walked into our hostel room and sat on a bed facing my friend and me. I had taken off my contacts; I could only read the texts she sent me wondering what a middle-aged man was doing in a hostel room, that we were the only ones on the entire floor, that he was staring at us, that he had pulled some kind of rope or cord from his bag and was still staring in our direction. Our texts were viscerally short: since I was on the top bunk, I would go for the head. Lexi, on the bottom bunk, would go for his groin. We only had to survive whatever he did to us until someone else got back to the dorm, and hope that the rope meant he didn’t plan on killing us first. If we’d been thinking clearly we might have locked ourselves in the bathroom, or screamed for someone at the front desk, but I still remember how it felt, that night, that the whole world had narrowed down to this rainbow-walled room, and nothing else existed, just me, and Lexi, and the man on the bed.

I remember the epiphany that everything they teach girls growing up – clever tricks with serrated keys, hooked fingers around windpipes – is fantasy. Every woman’s life is only borrowed from the men around her. Nineteen years I had been allowed to believe my life was

mine, but my life was my body, and my body was a conglomerate of parts that made me convenient for this man on the hostel bed.

The tension was somewhat broken when he used the cord to plug in his phone.

Then he asked us where we were from, because apparently we had been staring, and he had been uncomfortable.

Obviously this was Amsterdam.

Obviously looking back, there were two of us, and one of him, and if we'd landed our hits to his groin and his eyes, he would have felt pain. My life could not possibly have been as out of my control as I perceived it then, but I am not there now, and if I can't believe my epiphanies then I can only believe in the purity of my fear.

On the mountain, in the river, I never *believed* I would die, but in that room I was certain I would. I didn't think of my parents, or the novels I hadn't written, or the short will I'd typed out on my phone a year earlier before getting on the back of a motorcycle with a reckless boy in Sicily.

I thought about movies. Something about how I'd just become every girl in every horror movie, and how every horror movie was true, because the horror was true. The girl at the beginning who screams and trips and dies for someone else to solve and spur a story believes she *is* the story, and I had believed I was the story, the main character, but in fact I had been an opening act all along, a body for someone else to find, a sensational headline about two girls slaughtered in an Amsterdam hostel that would move other mothers to tell other daughters to carry pepper spray and hold their keys between their fingers, and how those girls believed that they, too, were main characters, when statistically some of them would end up just like me, *meat*, in a room with a staring man and a rope.

And then something about how Lexi and I had known exactly how to react to this situation because we *had* seen it in so many movies – that these expressions of fear were learned expressions, straight out of millions of stories where two girls are followed by/approached by/dragged into a van by/trapped in a room by a man and there's no dramatic irony about it, both they and the audience know what's coming, and their reactions mirror the reactions of the numberless girls before them. The movies taught me how to feel fear: how fear moves the body and the face, and gives you a script of what to say.

I remember that I wondered whether maybe someone at the very beginning had written fear all wrong, and ever since then we've mimicked something further and further from true fear, and that maybe in this media-soaked age all our instincts are truly learned from the television.

Maybe no one remembers how to be afraid anymore.

I also remember thinking that only attractive girls are killed in the movies. My murder would be a final confirmation that I was conventionally attractive.

But it was a phone cord, in any case. Lexi and I still laugh about that night we thought we were going to be murdered.

- The night before – neon blue and pink and yellow and dark wood and the mirrors and the strawberry drink and Lexi asking if we'd been drugged and laughing and laughing – I *watched* myself die. We'd been sitting in a bar and I started to panic very calmly, and asked Lexi if we could walk back to the hostel on the suspicion that something terrible had begun to happen to me. When we got back to our room, I asked her if I was going to die. Just out of curiosity, but Lexi panicked and asked the only other person in the room, a man who worked at the hostel, what to do. He told me to wash my face, which I did, and he said, "See? She's fine," even though my lips had gone white. I watched their conversation about whether it was safest to call an ambulance, all the while feeling something gathering inside my ankles, traveling up through my legs, pooling in my chest, unable to give clear thought to the growing hunch that it was my spirit. I'd never suspected that I might have a spirit, but there was nothing else I could have called it; it was clearly my life-force, and it was clearly about to leave me. Once it got to my face I would never get it back. Lexi and the man were both looking at me. One of them said, "*Should we call an ambulance?*" For a fraction of a second, I wavered. I was nearly certain I was going to die, and equally certain that I wasn't, because I had never died before, and it seemed statistically unlikely. But I'd also never felt my spirit leaving me. In the end I told them no, aware as soon as I did that I was saying yes to the very real possibility that I would die that night, solely because I did not want to risk the monumental inconvenience of an ambulance if I turned out to be fine. It's interesting to know, now, that between the risk of death and the risk of bothering someone, I chose my own death. The man from the hostel returned to the front desk. I told Lexi I would be fine, somewhat guiltily, because I didn't know if I would be, and she'd already seen too many people die in her life as it was, then closed myself in the bathroom. For several seconds I hyperventilated, feeling my spirit waft up through my throat, gather beneath the skin of my eyes, and then – I saw it leave me. Between the walls of dark tile it was pink and grey glitter in the shape of my face. Then it dispersed and I was left shuddering, choking on my own breath, still alive. Afterwards I think I brushed my teeth and went to bed, and now I rarely think of it.
- Earlier this year, when I was starving myself in Oxford, I forced myself to eat a meal, and then panicked. I wanted it out of me. I had never been able to make myself throw up before – I preferred just not to eat in the first place, because it was simpler, and the health risks associated with anorexia versus bulimia seemed, if not safer, then comparatively cleaner. I couldn't trigger my gag reflex. Google gave me numbers for poison control, recommended ipecac syrup, which we didn't have, gargling with raw egg, which was gross but ineffective, and finally baking soda mixed with water. I didn't measure, just made a white paste and swallowed it. Nothing happened. I might have felt a bit dizzy. I went to bed. Months later – out of curiosity? Or an

identical desperation? – I researched baking soda again, and remembered that I had in fact read that high concentrations of baking soda were toxic, that baking soda could dangerously alter the body's pH, that children had died from accidental overdoses. It hadn't seemed to matter. Rereading that information, I felt nothing more than vague interest. Even now my feelings are suspended. I might have killed myself, but I didn't. I am not interested in the fact that I could have killed myself (because it didn't happen?). It seemed too calm an evening to belong on this list.

§

521. Medieval con, pretending to be specific god for peasants, ceremonially fed paint to become an artist, color comes alive, deity of a color, poured into glass, burned in furnaces, always comes back, accoutrements of god become small living deities, like blue of Madonna's cloak, worshipped just as much as she is, infusing the wrong thing with life by accidentally praying to it instead of what you meant to, "They always think we are trying to say something with the paint, they don't know that the paint itself speaks to us," living paint, spirits, demons, gods, tried to bring person back by painting them with blessed/god/holy paints, all those years she hadn't been saying make a beautiful picture of her, she was asking to be made into a painting, transmutation/migration of souls through painting them(holy paint?), steals souls through painting, capturing them in paint

§

5.

Before the first time I slept with anyone – and I knew it was inevitable, that summer, the moment he and I had any pretext to be alone – I told myself that it would objectively hurt less than driving a butcher's knife into my arm. And I wouldn't be scared of driving a butcher's knife into my arm. So there was no rational reason for the shivery dread I got whenever I thought about it.

It was going to happen, and I had endured worse hurts.

Bouquets of needles as a child, shots for malaria and Japanese encephalitis as we moved around Southeast Asia, the quarter-year blood tests I had to get for my hypothyroidism. I used to hide and the Med Unit nurses would have to drag me out and hold me down as I screamed until I decided that was embarrassing. Somewhere in my mind I still do that, even a month ago as I went for my blood test, but now most of me tries to be interested in how precisely the needle feels going in, and telling myself that this is the least I'd have to endure as any character in a fantasy story.

Even auditioning, voluntarily, for school plays: stilling my shaking hands, silencing the litany of prayers for the stage to burn down before I had to speak. It never occurred to me that I didn't have to audition. So sleeping with someone felt like a duller version of that.

It was in Sicily, and I was staying with his family to learn Italian, and I had vaguely decided to make him fall for me to prove to myself that I could be normal. By the time this particular consequence of my success came about, I only felt a blurred notion that I owed it to the narrative of that summer to finish what I'd started.

Besides. I'd had a lifetime of needles in my arms and cavities drilled before the painkillers could kick in.

I still can't come up with a reason why it should have felt worse than that, or why I have to keep pausing between words.

He asked; I said yes; both formalities, not indicative of anything really, except I did say yes, which in this case means it wasn't rape or anything close to it, and even if he had been able to read my thoughts he wouldn't have seen a *no* there, only that little place where I close myself up in my mind when I don't want to feel something.

It was a relief to realize that sex, on my part, only required staying still. At one point I think he even said, "You're not *doing* anything," which is almost funny, because he was saying it to someone bunched up against a car door in a little Italian car, so I can't imagine what he'd thought I might do. I was only trying to stay relaxed, because I remembered a thousand scenes in medieval novels of wimpled mothers sagely telling their daughters not to tense up on their wedding night, because that made it hurt more. That was the sole time he complained about my inaction.

In all the times that followed, I remember thinking that I could die halfway through, and he would still take his pleasure from my corpse just the same, and only realize after that I was no longer alive.

It was months later, back at home, that I realized I was horrified by what happened. For a whole year after I couldn't think about anything remotely sexual without feeling nauseous.

I think I'm fine now, though I keep having to stop writing this, and peel at my nails.

The moral, I think, is that it does matter what happens to your body, even if it doesn't hurt as much as a butcher's knife. I still do worse things to myself – things that hurt, physically, far worse than that little Italian car on top of the island.

The next time a boy touched me, I was shivering too hard to touch him back.

I don't know. I don't know what else there is to say.

I always forget that earlier that very same week, the week with the little Italian car and comforting myself with thoughts of butchers' knives, the other American girl I was living with was brutally raped on a beach. Black stones instead of sand, so her chest was covered in cuts. Massive bruises blooming on her shoulders, her ribs, the backs of her legs. She didn't know the Italian for *stop* or *help*. She'd been with her best friend, too, a boy, who'd been too shell-shocked to do anything more than watch when a massive man had grabbed her out of nowhere. Actually, I don't remember if he just watched – I think he had a bruise somewhere too, but I don't remember how he got it.

I remember sitting with her on her bed afterwards in an informal sort of vigil, late into the night, while our host family spoke to the *polizia* and our professor, and how she was cracking jokes and talking about her photography projects. She said it wasn't the first time something like this had happened to her. I want to say that I saw through her casual veneer to something more raw underneath, but I didn't, so maybe she was a good actress, or I'm less perceptive than I thought I was, or you really can get used to anything.

Somehow knowing what had happened to her didn't slow whatever momentum was propelling the Italian boy and me to his car on top of the island later that week. Somehow the two incidents had no bearing on one another, or maybe it was only because there was something so horrible behind me that I could lie in his car and not move and tell myself that wasn't its own kind of horror.

I genuinely don't know.

§

478. Throws up all organs to be queen, has to become something else

464. Two enemies (in war?) stranded in manor together, lay traps/leave messages for each other, like toy horse knocked over is reference to specific battle, shoes laid on carpet is microcosm of enemy's movement through house, etc. So instead of letters, whole rooms make correspondence so both sides have to decode entire rooms, no papers or pens, like I Spy in room-form, in whole mansion, leave clues, both always on edge

§

4.

Is it normal to feel intense bouts of apathy towards the person I love?

I ask my friends – who have never been in love – and they say that my feelings are valid, but I don't care if they're valid, I care if they're *right*. Valid does not help me, a person who spent the critical years of her childhood with no one to talk to, only fantasy books that made me confident that I'd know how to act once I was loved.

Except then I realized I came with a *personality*, and that I sometimes felt before I could choose to feel. The snags in this relationship somehow always manage to slide between the cracks of what I've learned. It does bother me, I think, when he tells me I'm cold, except I can't swear to myself that I'm not doing it on purpose to test him.

I was honest. I said, I act warmer around you so you'll like me. He said, I thought we were past the point of acting around one another.

Jesus *Christ*. I'm glad you think that. I'm glad I seem real to you.

Sometimes it disgusts me that I've imagined loving him forever; other times I think how lucky that makes me.

§

Excerpt of Britomart, 2018

Handwritten spells for summoning the 444, 907th dimension lay scattered across the jewel-colored carpets in a constellation of paper. Britomart stood by the window, murmuring to herself as her finger traced its way down the page of a tome bound in vivid aquamarine leather and ondines' hair.

She did not even notice when the small conjuring circle carved atop the mahogany of her desk began to fizz and hiss, pink foam bubbling around the edges until a figure unfolded itself, and stood, watching her. It had the appearance of a woman with translucent skin, lilac hair and eyes that were lilac from corner to corner. The silver crown of a duchess hung suspended in the air around its waist. It was only a foot high.

For several moments, it did not speak, and then it said, "Have you considered, magician, that he is already with you?"

Britomart jumped, her hands tightening around the book, but when she saw the pale figure on her desk, she only frowned. "Return to Hell, if you please. I did not summon you."

Gremory, Duke of Hell, did not move. “Certain magickal theories suggest that each plane lies atop, or within, the others – that each plane is, in a sense, *every* plane. Your lover turned to light, magician.” The figure of the lilac-haired woman gestured to the yellow beams of sunlight streaming through the arched window beside Britomart, the stained glass tinting the light teal and red and purple and gold. “He is all around you.”

There was, abruptly, another fizz, and hiss, and bubbling of foam, and in a cloud of smoke redolent of apple blossom, Gremory vanished.

Britomart’s frown did not fade, though she stared for a long moment at the spears of light slicing through the air in front of her. She reached up, touched her hand to the light, let it spill and pool into the spaces between her fingers as though it were truly another hand holding hers.

§

440. Botanist going to find researcher/adventurer lover in House of Love, place where all lost lovers end up, red/orange marble house full of terrible scary things(traps, poison) but none of it can touch you so long as you’re in love, designed to undercut your surety in the one you love, the more you doubt the more house can hurt you, she worries that her lover likes being searched for more than they like being loved

364. Alt. Queen of Peace where non-human entity is trying to capture/understand human grief, preserves dead son of king, wrings king of grief, keeps scream as a ribbon on the hilltops, gets caught and banished, returns again and again in many different forms, gets close to king for his grief, takes form of Queen of Peace, mysterious jester figure come to cure king, golden eye on bedroom ceiling

§

3.

When I forgot what I looked like, we went body-watching.

I said, “Do I look like her?” and L said, “No.”

“Her?”

“No.”

“Her?”

“No.”

“Then you find someone. Tell me who I look like.”

§

Excerpt of Fiend, 2017

The scavenger’s lip curls. “If you’re trying to convince me you’re human, you’re doing a poor job of it.”

“Ah, ser,” I say. “Tell me what you would have of me, and ‘tis yours. Shall I bleed for you? Pick a bone and I will peel back the flesh and show you ‘tis identical to thine own skeleton.”

§

351. (Tomb raider?) that’s a mess of curses, their eyes fall out, can’t eat stuff because certain organs don’t work, vomits up snakes etc. but they’re not dead because a lot of curses cancel each other out, they’re super psychically significant just because they’re trailing so many curses, shows up on everyone’s psychic radar

328. Hounds of Love(white borzoi) drag you to person you love and tear you limb from limb if love isn't requited, Gothic, town drowning in frilly pink heart talismans, everyone terrified of falling in love or even being polite to each other

§

2.

I bought a white coat on purpose so I'd have to stop bleeding. Tearing at my nails is clearly some form of sublimated anxiety, but why? What am I so perpetually anxious about? Why is it so much better to be in pain than to leave one pale thread of skin loose on a fingertip?

There's a language to layers of skin. I'm familiar with at least eight of my own, possibly more. I'm an expert in angles, and knowing which layer is connected to which, and which frilled edge will hurt the most or least to tear, and how far I can get from a nail before the skin becomes inelastic, and a missing chunk becomes less apparent stress and more *wound*.

There is an architecture to wounds. Layers of skin make steps that someone very small could climb, canyon grooves and dead white paths and sometimes even marshlands, very moist and smooth and bloodless, speckled with white dots that I can't identify, biologically, but in practice they mean that going deeper is unthinkable. There are so many colors I can coax from a nail bed – not all pinks and reds, but limes and lavenders and navies – and of course they hurt but they are fascinating to look at. I am an archaeologist.

I think of my skin as a series of tides wrapping my body, flowing over my fingertips again and again. I do feel bad, I think. I don't imagine a body could survive all at once what my fingers have endured over twenty years – all the weeks where I was forced to write with my left hand, or sleep with a finger in a bowl of near-boiling water to drain, or knot a tissue around my hand to finish my essay when one of my nails ripped off mid-SAT. I think I do feel bad.

My parents cry when they see my hands, and say that one day I'll stop healing.

- In the ocean as a child, I lost a chunk of my leg to coral and I didn't feel it. I've never seen deeper into myself; a trick of the light made me think I could see bone glinting at the bottom of the cavern.
- I've only coughed up blood once, but once it was out of me it was like a living thing all on its own.
- (Interactions with vanity?)
- (False lists I would tell my parents of middle school classmates with the same habit)
- (Current physicality informed by a life of hiding my hands/subconsciously altering my behavior to conceal my fingers)
- (A physical means of closing the distance between the inside world and the outside?)
- (Though I should have been a surgeon if I was that curious)

Miscellaneous metaphors from the past decade:

- Wet tarot spread of organs atop a butcher's table
- But the blood was not blood; the blood was flowers, amaryllis and alstroemeria and star-shaped pentas blossoming from cold flesh, out of dead fingertips, like living, luminous wounds

- Blood as the body's fire
- Jewels on her body like precious, glittering infections
- A flower blooming in her side
- A vegetable, a beetroot, a gem of purple garlic
- Black and red and deep elderberry-purple; misshapen organs, veins, nerves, sinews, ligaments; red ropes unknitting themselves, the red labyrinth in his chest that kept him alive coming unwound, all the paths that led to his heart...the thousand hands now closing like a thousand mouths upon the various bits of him and pulling, unspooling, unwinding the man like so much glistening yarn, the maze pulled smooth until he was not a man anymore but a series of lines spiraling out of a torso like points on a star, like a maypole

I am guilty of romanticizing anatomy. I am too curious about what's inside. Maybe that was another reason to starve: to close the distance between my insides and my outsides.

I just want to see my own heart, I guess! And be underwhelmed once and for all!

§

518. Nameless stranger in play keeps dying/reappearing to play certain parts, main character can't figure out who it is, because it's them, it's their own death, goes and sees it played out every night, tries to figure it out, keeps obviously receiving omens that they're dead, no idea whatsoever, feels like all the players are watching them like they know something, Players know stories. More to the point, they know how stories end. Players are like prophets. They know the signs of a tragedy. They can sense it coming miles off on the horizon.

519. Two hunters in a medieval forest setting out to kill legendary beast, no two stories describe it the same, each time they're convinced *this* monster is the beast, but never quite is, mysterious, old French, implication that beast is one of them? Never quite know if they killed it or it's one or both of them or if it even existed before they came (because now stories about the beast are about them, inadvertently? Can't remember which came first), "Perhaps the real monster is doubt"

§

1.

I always thought I could outsmart being a woman; I always thought I could outsmart having a body. 'I stopped eating for a while,' I've said, like it was something fun that happened incidentally, and not like I spent nights shivering and wondering if this would be the night my heart finally stopped.

I want to cry when I think about my heart. I tried thinking of it like a small animal I had to protect, but I still didn't eat.

M says that talking to me then was like talking to a religious fanatic. Someone, perhaps, whose hunger for god outweighed their hunger for food. Except not god, in my case – emptiness. The sensation of floating above. The thought that if there was less of me, there'd be less of me to miss him.

Over the course of these conversations he would coax me back into life and emotion, and when our calls ended I would sputter out again. All I remember is seeing my arm in the camera lens like a white branch, a stick, a bone, impossibly thin, the bloodless color of something that in nature often means that it's dead.

It did feel holy. Emotions are the first thing to go when you're starving. It feels clean. I would see other people eating and think, I am not like you: different substances sustain us – as though I could eat with my mind. I think I genuinely believed that I could. Those days I felt like a wisp of air.

Here is a secret: I would still be a skeleton if skeletons could write. If starving people could write like me, I would still be starving. I'd love to tell myself I wouldn't have died but I still remember that in the beginning I saw pictures of people who were barely people anymore, and I was horrified, but as the months passed the horror faded in favor of a kind of sick jealousy. I'd love to tell myself I could have stopped, that there would have come a day when I could see myself and say, *this is enough*, but the truest thing I ever read about this disease is that if you stay in long enough, there comes a point where there are no more safe foods, where all flesh is bad flesh, where anything you can pinch between your fingers is proof that you are still unclean. And you are forced to confront the fact that it was never about the amount of flesh you had, but that you are made of flesh in the first place, but by the time you reach that point you would have no mind left at all. Even the mind is made of flesh. Perhaps I would have resented even that.

But emotions really aren't the first to go.

The first to go is that fine diamond edge of early-morning clarity, where my mind doesn't even feel like my mind but like a perfect organic machine designed to string sentences into narratives – like I can see every connecting thread between word and emotion, and my laptop keyboard holds the keys to the code of the entire world.

It's more than clarity. I don't know what it is. It's why I have to stay alive, and why my body can wither or bulge or decay and I do not get to care, because I am lucky enough to know why I'm alive, and I cannot set that aside for some pathetic aesthetic desire to look ethereal.

§

529. (Like this ship, I'm made of nothing new: carbon and titanium, pink and blue, some wire. Aluminum and hydrogen. Alloys. Electricity. Engines and water.) LIA, alone on pink yellow blue spaceship that floods and freezes every night, doesn't know if her ship is actually controlled by someone else and this is all a sham of repairing or she's actually saving her own life every time

§

Excerpt of Laburnum Alchem, 2018

She's not what I've been running from, in my mind – she's such a little thing, smaller even than me. Slaughter has not been kind to her. One of her arms is missing, and half of her leg, trailing a veiny mass of sparking pink and blue tubes. Iridescent cords burst from her back like broken bones. Her heart is a bouquet of roses between her silver lungs, a melting pool of comets and cobalt and frozen violets. Her heart is a shard of something radiant. It splits me open to look, excoriates me out of my skin as though looking were a scalpel, so instead I wade through the delirium to look at her eyes.

Pink glass eyes, like dolls of Pasha's rabbits. Silver mercury stars, in their depths. Myself, my own face, distorted, reflected madly back at me.

This close to the god-shard, she is the only semi-real thing. My vision swirls rainbow around her like a chemical spill, roses well from my eyes and roll wet down my cheeks, the rest of the world turns to shooting stars in fuchsia and silver, gold and emerald and lilac, ultramarine the color of sleep.

Neither of us moves, until she reaches up to touch her remaining hand to my cheek. Very distantly, I feel the cold brush of copper.

In a quiet, whispery, child's voice, she says, "*Delia...Rosenthal.*"

A thousand worlds away, I nod.

She says, "*I dreamed...I was a girl.*"

I swallow. My mouth has become a roiling, starry sea. "You weren't supposed to realize. That you were dreaming."

Something is leaking from the sockets of her eyes. Something silvery and iridescent, like if the moon could bleed. My fingertips brush her face before I can recall lifting my hand. It occurs to me that she's crying.

She says, "*I saw you, in my dreams.*"

"Well...I used to make them."

"*You...made me realize. That my lives...were not real.*"

"Well – I –"

"*The life...in the city. My school. My...friends.*"

"I wanted you to have a life. Even only in a nameless city, in a dream-"

"*The crystal...worlds. Walking through...the sky.*"

My breath shudders down my throat. Whatever she's crying, it's on my hands now, diamond-bright. I can't tell if she's going to kill me. "I thought it would be nice. I – they were going to fire me-"

"*It isn't...real?*"

The roses are falling faster down my face. "No...none of it. You can't really walk through the sky, and and there's no city with a pastel sun – I'm – I'm so sorry-"

She lifts her hand from my face to gaze at the wires of her veins, all bunched together. "*I don't know...what this is. I was...a girl...until I woke up...and now – now-*"

Whatever her tears are, they're flowing faster down her face. She's trembling, making the cords dance and skitter across the floor, sending ripples down the rows of her reflections. We are precisely the same height, so it's an easy thing for me to step forward and gather her into my arms. She doesn't kill me. She doesn't move. She's icy-cold, and wherever I touch her, a thousand chemicals soak into my lab coat, searing my skin. I don't feel it, or anything, except I'm crying a meadow around us, and her tears blaze a flaming trail down my back.

My lips form words, and I hear them as a stranger: "It isn't so nice, out there. It's better down here. I gave up my entire life to see you."

"*I don't want...to be this.*"

"Well...even if you weren't, they wouldn't leave you alone. If you were a girl. Outside. You'd still be – I mean, you wouldn't *not* feel the way you're feeling."

"*I don't...like this,*" she says. "*I want to go back to sleep.*"

“I – oh, god.” The corridor is flooded with roses, adrift on a silver pool. We stand ankle-deep in both of our tears, and my skin burns cold. The mirrors are melting down the walls in liquid starfire. Still my tongue shapes words, and I listen. “I think you killed everyone that knows how to do that. I only know how to make dreams. I – I don’t think you can go back to sleep.”

For a long, long time, she says nothing. When a sound begins to rise around us, it takes me several moments to realize what it is: a high, keening wail spiraling out of her voice-box, a raw, mechanical sound, like metal being tortured.

I don’t know if she knows how to cry.

I never put sadness in her dreams. What I did was silly, unimportant, I had always thought, which is why no one ever stopped me from coding her dreams into candy-tinted fairytales of life, where a half-robot half-god half-girl might go to middle school beneath a wisteria sky, and never worry about her moving parts, never feel like a machine built by other people under the ground to house some divine fragment, as though a girl could live without sadness, without being constantly vivisected by a thousand eager eyes.

If I’d had the chance, in the past, when I was just a girl, to go back to sleep, I would have taken it.

Instead I came here, underground, to code dreams, and not really live.

Now we stand in a liquid garden up to our knees.

She says to me, “*Then let me live in your mind.*”

I blink. The roses slosh. “*What?*”

“*You built...my dreams. You...dreamed them.*”

“Yes...but-”

“*Take my heart,*” she says, and lifts my hand to her chest, between the silver lanterns of her lungs, to her heart-cage. “*Let me...sleep.*”

“I don’t know what you – I don’t know if that would even work. Oh, god-” She’s opened the heart-cage, and the god-shard glints and dazzles in her chest. It looks, for a heartbeat, like an eyeball, floral galaxies foaming inside the lens.

She’s making me reach for it, making my fingertips close around it, and the instant I touch it, she collapses into a corpse-shaped labyrinth of cords and glass and copper.

All at once, I’m holding the god-shard – holding *her*.

And I am no longer Delia Rosenthal, but a carnival of atoms, a kaleidoscope of spinning parts, petals and planets blooming out of my hands like I am every god at once. The fraction of me that remembers a laboratory corridor can’t be sure this is what she wanted, but before the radiance whips my brain into genetic froth, I lift my hands to my mouth.

I tip the god-shard down my throat, and swallow, and then I begin to dream.