

Wes Anderson, Where Art Thou?

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For Cat.

*Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.*

—ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

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PART I — HIGHBALL

It was twelve forty-two in the morning, and Johnnie wanted to have sex.

His text message said so.

I want to have sex with you

It resurrected my phone screen, the solitary beacon illuminating an otherwise dark and drowsy bedroom.

Who the hell wants to have sex at one in the morning? I thought.

I let the question float unexamined before reasoning that such a desire was likely the reality for any person with a lover or an active sex life. Just because I liked to believe my own removed, albeit easily swayed, take on the whole business was presumably unconventional for someone at the age of twenty-two, it couldn't have been that valid of a reason to criticize the standard, could it?

But who's to say everyone's love life isn't unconventional? I thought, reaching for my phone. *Love itself is unconventional.*

I stared at the message, the time, the Maxfield Parrish screensaver, registering none of them, and turned back to the window. I'd been sitting in a coffee-stained armchair for the past four hours, unable to devote myself to any task greater than swimming in the lurid pool of disconnected thoughts concerning my future, concerning my life.

The window was open but the blinds were down because I liked the bars of dirty golden light thrown against the wall when the sun set. The sky had been especially rosy, all bruised purple and burnt orange and eye socket scarlet. It melted to a lilac gray over an operatic aria; any scene swelled with grandeur and meaning when set to an aria. The clouds spilled over the rooftops in premonitions of love and death, in godlike warnings and consoling indifference. I traced the fiery comets of the airplanes and their dissolving white tails. Their crosshairs traced fragmented poetry in my mind. It was pieces of Dylan Thomas that night.

Blaze. Meteors. Gay.

My eyes drowned in the sky's cryptic, apocalyptic depths. I had the sudden urge to reach out and pull the sky in—to myself. To harness the clouds with my hands and breathe the sun's molten lava orange.

Rage. Rage.

Trailing dusk came the dull-lantern streetlights. The aria faded into the ceaseless chatter of the dinner crowd four stories below. And my thoughts scuttled, star-burst, into tunnels of morbid vanities and depressions. That is where I found myself moored, thumbing the yellowed pages of a book, unable to comprehend the words, watching the impersonal streetlight pool off the dreary mirror leaning against the opposite wall, thoughts disintegrating into empty fields of gloom—when the text message drew me from my waking sleep.

I didn't want to have sex; it was too profound, too internal a practice to prove a distraction that night. But I wanted to be alone even less.

Be right down.

Send.

The room was a vacuum of space, blank and slate gray with only the mirror, the chair, a bed and chest of drawers—all of them unadorned. I fastened myself into a button-down pulled from two suitcases propped open on the floor, scooped up a jacket and the book, still unread. Sprayed one too many pumps of cheap cologne, checked the silhouette of my hair in the darkened mirror. I locked the apartment door with a solitary key, slid the key into my pocket. Boarding the rickety, bronze-mirrored box of an elevator, I pressed the button for the ground floor.

I'd forgotten it was Saturday until I opened the door of my complex and collided with the crowd of whores on the street. Drunk college students bellowed at each other with sparsely clad women pressed between them like remoras hovering about dull-eyed tiger sharks, making their customary migrations up town. I hated being out on weekend nights. The police closed off traffic to the heart of the city, and the rabble swung free in the streets—like *Singin' in the Rain* but no rain, just booze. The city's finest on display to no one but a few cops and the odd homeless chap.

The alley into which I'd ducked deposited me near the back entrance of the room where Johnnie bartended. It was an exotic cuisine, white tablecloths, candlesticks on the table type place, with a tarnished-silver, exposed brickwork

kind of look. Though a baby grand slept always untouched in one corner—as if waiting for the resurgence of the bar’s oft-whispered-of better days—they played smooth jazz over the loudspeaker, which was a rare commodity these days. I’d started attending on nights plagued by some undefinable dread. I’d settle at the bar and scrawl lines of poetry until I couldn’t think anymore—or drink until I couldn’t write anymore. That’s how I met him.

It took him about an hour to clean and lock up, which is why he texted me when he did. I sat on the curb of a side street, compulsively biting my lower lip.

This time tomorrow I’ll be gone.

I wrapped my arms around my knees, tried to still my restless-tapping feet.

If this were a movie... I thought.

If this were a movie, I’d be smoking.

I jammed my book into my jacket pocket and dug out a crumpled pack of Marlboro’s and a black gas station lighter. Relics of a photoshoot, I’d saved them in case I ever needed to model a cigarette again. *I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to do some modeling now*, I thought. The night swarmed about me in neon and navy blue, injected with an ungovernable heaviness, so I felt it was deserved.

I took a drag on the cigarette and thumbed through my book until I heard the scrape of shoes on gritty concrete. He settled down beside me, sharp angles and elbows, but smoother in bearing; movements seemingly effortless and genuine. His shoes lined up against mine. I traced their shiny black tips to his fitted pinstripe pants, his rolled-to-the-elbows white shirt, left unbuttoned until about the third button or so, giving me a downward-arrow shaped view of his flat and near-olive colored chest, which I had a sudden and desperate urge to touch. But he reached over and handed me a drink in a highball glass, and, alas, my hands were full.

“Thank you,” I said. “Where’s yours?”

He shrugged. “I finished mine inside.”

I took a sip of the cocktail, registered the sharp and cutting flavor with a smile. The ice tinkled in the glass. I didn’t feel much like drinking that night. I had, in fact, been out on the town just the night before—with Sam. We’d both gotten proper drunk as a gesture of hearty goodwill to my imminent departure, teetering on sidewalk edges in giggles and witty quips, which crescendoed appropriately in a spectacular hangover. But the crackling aches had since subsided, and given the lateness of the hour and the lethargic passing of my evening, I had long since lapsed

into a shoulder-shrugging, cheerful fatalism—a *que sera* state of being—no doubt some faulty defense mechanism against the well of panic threatening to swell by any loose pebble of a thought sent plunking into its depths. I took a larger swallow of my drink.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Johnnie said.

“Only for aesthetic purposes.”

He leaned forward and kissed me on the temple. A coiling little thrill ran up my chest. Locks of dirty blonde hair hung loose in his face; they were always parted to the one side, tracing an arc that settled beside green eyes and a small-pointed, narrow-bridged nose. Those eyes stared into mine now, saying nothing but—*I see you*.

Responding on impulse, I kissed his lips, which were always consolingly soft.

I’m ruined, I thought.

I took another drag on the cigarette, and he stared off into the distance.

A national bank housed the other side of the street; it gaped beneath levels of a parking garage, spinning high into the violet starless sky. The unbroken roar of the crowd rolled to our feet down passages, around corners, echoing from streets we couldn’t see. Pools of watery orange light haloed the streetlamps. They bounced off rows of black-glass windows, creating their own puffed-up, pitiful stars. I titled my head back.

Do I tell him? I thought.

“My place or yours?” he asked.

That coil of pleasure tightened my chest again. My apartment was much closer, but the thought of trying to find solace, of tangling up in him while the empty walls and their shadows gaped and swallowed at us was too disturbing a vision. So I tossed the glass’ ice cubes into the darkened maw of a storm drain, mashed my cigarette into the pavement before flicking the butt into the corner trashcan and said,

“Yours.”

Johnnie’s apartment was all dark woods and Edison bulb lamps and framed black and white portraits. He flicked off his shoes, padded across the floor to set a

record on the turntable—Ella Fitzgerald or Etta James or somebody—loosened two more of the buttons on his shirt, and started fixing another couple drinks at the kitchen island. He really was a classy guy. My chest ached.

I dropped my jacket in a chair, looked out the window across a sea of electric stars. The music was beautiful, but it wasn't helping.

I sat on the taupe-colored sofa and accepted another drink—this one in a scotch glass—with a little lime wedge on the rim.

“Ever the bartender,” I said.

The words sounded hollow in my ears. Johnnie clinked his glass to mine and knocked it back. He turned to the kitchen; a refill, I supposed. I sipped mine deliberately but could already feel it bubbling to my head. *When was the last time I ate something?*

Johnnie set the bottle on the sofa table, then stepped into his bedroom, glass in hand. I tilted forward and refilled my own, movements slow, affected. I watched the bubbles dance across the ice cubes. The record crackled and snapped between songs. Johnnie reentered without his shirt on. I caught the hitch in my breath. I couldn't shield my desire, and he knew it.

He sat down next to me and kissed the side of my face—the edge of my eye. I took another sip of my drink. I set it on the table. He leaned back into the sofa and I started running my finger along the cord of his necklace, tracing the pendant resting against his chest. It was the face of a saint printed on it, the patron saint of—something. My thoughts were a skittish scattered haze.

“What book are you reading?” he asked.

“What?”

“Your book.”

I got up from the sofa and pulled the paperback out of my jacket. A scuffed up copy of *On the Road* I'd found at some hole-in-the-wall bookstore for six dollars.

“This,” I said, dropping back into the sofa, noting the alcohol dragging on my senses, my senses aroused nonetheless. *Should I take off my pants?* I rubbed my palms along my legs.

“Can you read me something from it?”

The ice shifted in his glass.

“What?”

“Whatever page you’re on. I’d like to hear you read it.”

“Okay.”

I flicked the bookmark to the table and read him about a page; I couldn’t quite remember what had happened just before but it was one of those books where that didn’t matter much, the writing was the same beautiful rhythm all throughout and halfway down the next page when I jumbled the words, Johnnie leaned over and our foreheads pressed together and I was falling back into the sofa as he placed his finger to my lips with a laughing, lovely *shhh*, his necklace dangling in my face, and I started kissing his neck.

We undressed slowly. There was rarely any urgency to these nights, only a dim swell of passion and an unexamined sense of contentment. My heart was beating wildly. It always did.

The warm sparks of lamplight flashed in the silver rings wound around his fingers. One of them was a snake, coiled, eating its own tail. He was sighing in my ear.

If this were a movie, I thought. I’d kiss every one of them.

So I drew his hand to my lips and brushed them against the cool metal of his rings. Johnnie drew back, pulling me with him so I was sitting in his lap, legs wrapped around his waist.

“Come here, you,” he said.

Head tilted down, lips to lips. His line seemed a bit cliché, but—*what is love if not cliché?* I caught myself then—for an instant; but the awareness melted into drunken sadness. Why was love bound to a single word? Why did it sink with such a weight whenever spoken? Why couldn’t I say I love you—just in this moment, *for* this moment—and be understood?

The question drifted through my mind in lonely fragments long after the lamp had darkened and the record static-snapped into silence and our limbs stilled, entwined on the sofa—we hadn’t even made it to the bed—and in the dark I traced circles on the plane of his chest, traced the shape of the earth, the shape of the universe.

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PART II — NEPTUNE

I woke with a constricted throat. My skin felt chilled and prickly, my insides feverish. I needed air; I needed space; I needed— I untangled myself from the sofa, slipping out from the thin blanket he'd draped over us like a picnic quilt on the grass. I scrounged around in the dark, pulling on my shorts, my shirt. The world dipped when I stepped forward. I rested my hand on the door frame. *Nothing new*, I told myself. *Just finding my sea legs*. I used the bathroom in the dark, flushing the toilet with the lid on so it wouldn't wake him. Washing my hands in the sink, not looking in the mirror. Tiptoed to the kitchen, rinsed the scotch glass in the sink. Two refills of tap water, and I was feeling much more tolerable.

I sat down in a chair by the window, bent to pull on my socks. I stared out the window, all vacant-eyed and at a loss. Untangled my headphones, put on Lana Del Rey; picked up the book from the floor, tried to read a little. I thought about what it meant to be a true American. Did such a shade exist—and could it be obtained? The answer frightened me either way. Lana rasped her honey songs, Jack recounting his mad-to-live adventures. They worked in tandem, sharing their grainy-film snapshots like an out-of-time married couple. Mad smiles, dirty windshields. Yellow dashes flicking up to the horizon.

I thought about going home, but I didn't know what home was. I looked at Johnnie, angled balletic on the couch, one knee poking out from the blanket. Hair falling across his eyes. As slightly older in age as I was taller in height.

If this were a movie, now would be a good time to cry, I thought, but I couldn't cry.

I put away my phone and pulled my pants on. I laced up my shoes without a sound. Johnnie never spent the night at my apartment. He always chose to go home when we were done, in that strange-lingering emptiness of feeling like you just spent all you could afford. I'd never wanted to ask why that was. Standing beside him now, I felt the need to kiss his lips until he woke—ask him everything I'd ever wanted to ask him before—like can I tell you that I love you in this moment? And—

What would you say to me if you knew I won't be back?

I brushed the loose hair in place above his forehead. I left Kerouac on the sofa table for him. I hoped he wouldn't think it too derivative or smart-assed of a move for me.

It was a long walk back to my apartment—Johnnie drove us from the bar—one that would almost guarantee I'd be sober and ready for bed when I got in. His kitchen stove clock seared a green 3:35 into my brain before I left—but still, heroically and unsurprisingly, a small number of students swaggered to greet the approaching dawn—turning the night before into one long-ending day. Ribbons of litter adorned the streets like the aftermath of a wedding or someone's underrated graduation party. I tipped my head while I walked—but no stars. *A fine way to bid the city one last goodnight*, I thought. *Walking one end of downtown to the other.*

My own private Orlando.

Just as it always was, and now, in my memory, as it always would be. Blue night city sparkling; statues outside the library, fixed in the forms of watchful alligators and slumbering hobos. A great violet globe revolved on a pedestal, and murals of mighty, half-naked deities glared down from the kingdoms of their concrete heavens. A rippling crest of a wave curled beneath one—*must be Neptune*, I thought. He stared with a cold severity that both comforted and unnerved me in the same odd emotion. Trudging away down the sloping street, head down, arms swinging, I wondered if they had any candles burning in the cathedral on the corner, its cross lit a gentle gold.

Time passed as on a carousel—unaware of its presence until the spinning and bobbing and twinkling begins to slow. So too did my uneven, wandering steps cross without a knowledge of time or distance. The night was asleep to some, alive to me—and I was whole in my brokenness for just a carousel creature-riding moment.

Water glimmered along the stretch of curving road, the bridge a neon rainbow in the distance. Shops winked their all-night store-front signs like sleepy sporadic owl eyes. Palm fronds feathered each other like restless birds' wings. Another glass-clinked, foam-tossed night, dreams transposing into memory.

Last night... Sam and I were perched on crushed green velvet chairs, fairy lights looping down stripped-wood bookshelves with a case of various pill bottles lurking precarious in the corner. It flickered into sight across the stillness of the

lake—that cocktail room full of strangers and the circumference of the universe. Glasses shattered, bubbles burst.

I saw the world in the eye of a sabretooth's skull. The dark pit of the fossil spilled its socket of secrets, a kaleidoscopic oracle. Here was age and youth; love and hate; sickness and strength. Gin and tonics served up by a quiet god of mischief—but I had my eye on the busboy, blowing kisses from behind heart-shaped sunglasses. And the servers were swing dancing between the bathroom and the bar; and we were giggling over each other—we couldn't help ourselves. Who are these people? And why was everyone in the whole damn town sexier than I was? Rosy cheeked where I was hollow—a whole case of a life hanging over the counter. Old man in a fishing hat out of place at the corner. Business suits, college bums. A bride swishing around in her wedding dress. Friends, stand offs, transactions; the air smelled sharp and sweet, like bitter, edible flowers.

I couldn't pull on the ribbon, unwind it, pocket it—like I usually do. I was too far loose. I loved someone; I loved a multitude—as characters, from a distance. They didn't love me back. The black eye of the sabretooth—seeing all, saying nothing. We studied each other across the room, through the parlor's pallor of neon and gloom. I raised my glass, could feel the smile between its teeth. It ripped through what I'd written, tore through the curation of my fabricated dream.

I died in the street—toe to toe with the road, turning over relentless phrases, words across my tongue—to keep me sober and because I loved them, because they'd carry me home. I'd be born again in the morning—when all was but a cloud and I knew what I had done but not entirely why—relenting to my unknowing at last, to the circle that so rarely could be broken.

Trucks roared across the overpass.

If this were a film, I'd throw my head back and scream at the stars. From rage or from joy, I don't know.

— *But there are no stars tonight.*

I had a sudden vision then, crossing the last stretch of the road. A dainty, sharp-shouldered conductor stood in the street—visible only in silhouette—who, with a sharp flick of his baton, raised such a symphony of memory the sky flooded with broad spotlights of color—rich, violent, heavenly. A host of an orchestra responded in kind, playing from the awnings of restaurants, the parks, the bars. Flashes of radiant meaning, twisting and scoping—now scarlet, now yellow fire, now rueful, twilight blue—illuminated the skyline in a fatal, valedictory display.

Every night I'd ever spent in the city repeated itself back to me. Every twilight spectacle to which I'd bore witness, in rapturous or morbid intent, replayed in layers of ungrasped reality. Above the water, fireworks blossomed—every opportunity unaccepted, every joyous impulse not taken—imploding, gone. They crackled, filled my eyes with purple. The lake became a looking glass, and the fountains leapt, intermingling with the stars I created for myself. Raining down in jewel drops of rose, gold, diamond—a glittering flash—they paid tribute to the past that was and the past that might have been.

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PART III — DOLORES

I cut my alarm—Tchaikovsky’s “Pas de Deux”—which, by some miracle, I had remembered to set slugging in at close to five a.m. I stared at the white ocean walls of my room until they began to billow and spill in a consuming flood of inevitability. Rolling off the bed with only a lingering wisp of dizziness, I pulled fresh clothes from my luggage, preparing to run a shower—when I discovered with stunned dismay that in the drunken darkness of the night before, I had mistaken Johnnie’s shorts for my own. The sudden unexpectedness wrenched me into sobs. Embarrassment, loss—I don’t know what.

He’s going to think I did it on purpose, I realized with a jolt of alarm.

Blinking through the tears, I scrambled for my phone. No messages. Of course. No doubt he was still asleep. Should I say something? Thanks for a great night again? Scowling internally, I stared at myself in the mirror. Soft violet arcs of stress ringed my eyelids. I traced the flat ridges of my chest down my pale stomach, to the band of unintentionally stolen underwear plucked from a dark tangle of discarded clothes. It pulled to memory his chin on my shoulder, his breath down my back. A pair of green eyes and a threaded silver snake ring. I might have made it through the day pretending last night was a dream if it hadn’t been for that. I bent over and flipped on the tap, thinking: *If this isn’t material for some gritty, inventive metaphor, then I don’t know what is.*

Breakfast consisted of the last two eggs—the only thing left in the refrigerator—and the last single-use bag of tea. The tea I drank in the bedroom, gazing dully at my suitcases, laying open-mouthed and unorganized. A vintage set handed down by my sister who’d bought them on an old-school kick in college before gifting them to me when she off and married the corporate head of some finance company, they looked tremendous on the street but were a nasty pain for functionality—and I was a rotten packer besides. Staring at their bloated stacks of sweaters and books, a panic of incapability roiled behind my chest. I sat on them

both and squeezed their latches shut. I reasoned I might as well go ahead and leave; I sure as hell wasn't going to help myself staring into white walled voids from the corner of my bed. It wasn't even mine anymore. The room had unclothed itself into a stranger. Already it was unfamiliar to me.

I took out the trash, gave the room one last sweep. The furniture I'd inherited from the kid before me who couldn't take it with him when he moved to California. Now I'd be carrying out the tradition since the girl coming in next told the landlord she'd be glad to use it. I certainly couldn't bring it overseas.

I dropped my key in the little metal slot box bolted outside the office door, readjusted the strap of my book bag and lugged my two suitcases out of the lobby. Though not the actual property of the private university just down the street, the apartments were designed for the students' use—a fact I'd managed to exploit thanks to my own recent graduation and a plot involving my resurrected student email. It was, perhaps, the most sufficient and reliable place I had ever lived.

If this were a movie, I'd probably stop and look back, I thought, held for a moment in a ray of uncertainty. I gripped the suitcase handles.

This isn't that kind of movie.

Sam was already waiting inside Ernie's Café. A short, determined walk from my apartment, it nested between boutiques and hair salons, laid out along the street like pieces of fruit on a garden party torte. The sunlight was bright and invasive, bouncing across the street-parked cars and glinting in every face I passed. With grim resolve I shuffled along, ducking gratefully into the café's cooled interior. Despite its lackluster name, the place proved surprisingly un-American, garnishing mosaic tile floors, a vine-draped exterior, even a shallow indoor fountain.

Sam spared me from ordering, sliding an iced something across the table when I sat down. She had her laptop out—its lavender shell decorated in doodle stickers: a winking bean, a striped sock, a disgruntled toad wearing a party hat.

"There you are, old man!" she said, her earrings swinging in the form of little green cactuses. She slapped her hands on the table. "You ready for the big trip?"

"I guess so," I said.

She levelled her eyes at me, taking a gulp of whichever triple-shot, syrup-stirred atrocity she'd ordered for herself, the lid punched through with a peppermint-stripe straw ("reusable, of course").

“There is no guessing,” she said.

“Well I’m all packed and the apartment key has been relinquished.”

“Hot damn. I’ve just been doing some research on Ljubljana. Ljubljana, yes?”

I nodded.

“What’s the name of the place you’re staying at, again?”

I scrounged in my pocket, pulling up a folded piece of paper with an address written on it in pencil.

“This is it,” I said.

“This is the friend’s place?”

“Yes.”

I’d attended university with an art history major by the name of Felix Castaneda, who, post-graduation, landed a job working for an art museum in Slovenia. Having formed a close friendship of admittedly few words, we kept in touch sporadically, but when I’d rambled my desperate plight to relocate, he offered his apartment as a living space while he spent a season traveling cross-continent for some project with the museum. Hence the abrupt quitting of my job to move halfway around the world with no long-term plan, no second language, no contacts, no employment—

“This is all he gave you?” Sam asked. She fiddled with the rings on her fingers, then flew across the keys of her computer.

“I was planning to figure out the rest when I get there. He’s really bad about responding to text messages.”

“That makes two of you,” she mused. “I’m trying to find your nearest amenities. Closest subway station, marketplace, art gallery—all that.”

We had a bit of time, so I sipped my coffee, tried to catch my breath, let Sam conduct her research. I felt the bustle of the café surge about me and attempted to inhale it, to store it for remembrance. There *were* things I’d miss about this city. Not much, but the reality of departure brightened their significance and drowned out the rest. I’d miss the local coffee spots, the abundance of dripping-red, sky-saturated sunsets, the chair under my window, the skyline over the water at night—and Sam, of course.

Nibbling the edge of a pencil she'd pulled out of her strawberry brown hair, she started scribbling away on the piece of paper. A smattering of freckles speckled her face, mirroring her clothes' unironic ink and coffee stains. A dedicated painter, Sam spent her days between the studio and managing a coffee house at the other end of town. Though we shared a fair amount of international travel, hers was by far more impressive, what with her efficiency in three different languages and numerous solo trips spanning most of Europe, South America, New Zealand.

"You should come with me," I said.

"You know I would," she smirked, "but it's not quite my time."

"It's not in the cards?"

"Not yet."

The rhythm of her fingertips punching the keys and the hissing of the espresso machines lulled me into visions of lavender clouds, steamed-foam waves, darkened doorways stretched, pulled by portals of distance. One foot on the ground and one foot in the sea. A jagged drop of a cliff; an undivining iris lined with flaming eyelids. A sleepless knight of swords; a secret knave of hearts.

The eye blazed unblinking from above his elbow, tattooed on a landscape of smooth bronze skin. My eyes inevitably sank to his brown ankles, always visible between the cuff of his jeans and the curve of his sneakers. This was the tall, broad-chested barista who'd been working the café longer than I'd been frequenting, and though in that span of more than twelve months we'd never once actually spoken, I was certain our bright, seemingly intentional moments of eye contact were silent words thrown across a divide of space and timidity. With perfectly tossed waves of hair and a swaggering, untouchable gait, my fictions were full of wondering—which ancient god was this, walking among unseeing mortals, wiping off our tables and pouring swan-shaped latte art into our cups? Who was I to speak to such a force?

I knew I should, at least for the sake of my own satisfaction. I hated the thought of leaving with any what-ifs and loose ends, though my life unavoidably felt raveled with such unsolvable strings. What did I have to lose? I was leaving—for *Europe*. The least I could do was pay the king tribute to his enviable wealth of looks, subsequently dissolving the longing in my youth.

If this were a movie, I'd just walk up and tell him how I felt.

With a bitter drop in my stomach, I watched him pass a ticket to his coworker and sling a bag over his shoulder; his shift was up. He stepped out from behind the counter and made towards the glass door in the back.

If this were a movie, he'd turn around and come back.

Pulling up and pivoting, he strode across the floor in the direction of our table. I imagine my eyes widened like a frog's. But he brushed past to open the front door, communicating something to the barista cleaning up outside. Crossing back, he walked away; no words exchanged. Helpless, I watched his figure—framed in the doorway, silhouetted by the sun—push open the door and disappear down a sand-colored corner. I let him go.

Idiot.

Sam slid the piece of paper back across the table, oblivious to the conflict.

"Just some suggestions for when you get there," she said, "in case you need points of reference for the necessary things."

"Thank you so much," I said, blinding myself in the glare of sun on glass.

She snapped her laptop shut.

"Ready?"

The departures terminal of the international airport was a cesspool of lawlessness and poorly assembled baby carriages laden with souvenirs like caravan camels, pushed and paraded by families wearing just as poorly assembled travel outfits. Children rocketed pell-mell, the queue lines their runways, beating each other with neck pillows before starfish-sprawling on the well-loved tile floors. Mothers in painfully tight yoga sweats snapped their fingers at airline hostesses, asking to speak with their managers. Red-eyed fathers in the early exhaustion stages of a vacation hangover stared into the void of their imminent financial reckoning, only just beginning to grasp how much money they'd squandered with every royalty-style wave of their touch-to-pay bracelets. Any dignity the airline stewards had hoped to maintain was swiftly abandoned. I looked out and saw a sea of monsters—roiling, wriggling—landmarked by build-your-own plastic space sabers protruding from the backpacks of grown men, sniveling nests of cheer teams wearing mouse ear headbands, and behemoth plush toys, often larger than the children bearing them, gazing serenely upon the scene with haunting smiles that hinted of their celestial knowledge: *"the hour of the apocalypse is nigh."*

Sam, in her infinite well of comradery and fearlessness, offered to come inside with me. Or rather, demanded it.

“If I can’t travel *with* you, seeing you off is the next best thing. The least I can do is live vicariously through you—I’m going.”

In surprising fortuity, our own queue provided an uncrowded and humane environment, due to my flying with a primarily international airline instead of a solely domestic one. Reaching the check-in desk, I slid the austere, salt-and-pepper haired attendant my passport.

“Checking in for my three o’clock flight to Dulles Airport—long term to Ljubljana, Slovenia. I haven’t printed my boarding passes yet. I was hoping to get them here.”

The attendant nodded her head in assent, took my passport, and began clacking across her keypad. Sam surveyed the court of chaos, forming her own judgements, lost in her own nostalgia. The attendant slid my passport back.

“Flight five-five-zero-one to Dulles at three fifteen this afternoon, standard economy,” she listed, “with two connecting flights—one to Munich and from there you fly with Lufthansa Airlines to Ljubljana, correct?”

“Yes,” I said.

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Your payment is processed and received. Seats are selected.” She hesitated. “But—”

No.

“—There appears to be a hold on your passes. There’s a missing form required by the Slovenian government. Are you aware of any documents you didn’t sign?”

“I submitted the standard permission-to-enter form,” I said. “It was approved.”

“Hm.”

A prickle of panic shot up my spine. Her fingers clacked again. Within a few minutes she had the answer.

“Yes, there is also a medical form required. Proof of a rabies shot within the last three years.”

“Rabies?”

“Do you know when the last time you received a rabies vaccination was?”

My memory spun. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been given a shot—let alone visited any kind of clinic or doctor. Anything I’d ever been sick with I cured with sleep, vitamins, hot tea—and all from the comfort of home. The world of medical science was strange and foreign to me; I balked at the thought of waiting rooms, white hallways, the awful crinkling tissue paper they draped over patient examination chairs.

“I don’t understand.”

“It *is* something quite recent,” she said. “There’s been a sudden outbreak of rabies among the wild dogs of the city. Apparently they have quite a significant dog population there. In order to ensure the safety of travelers, the government is requiring all visitors to show proof of a recent rabies vaccination in order to enter. Just as a precaution.”

Quite a dramatic precaution.

“And...” she scanned her monitor. “Yes. If possible, I’d suggest getting a typhoid shot as well. They have it listed here under ‘advisable,’ so just to be safe.”

Her clipped, off-hand attitude stirred a pool of infuriation behind my eyes. Visions of castles and cobblestone alleys, blue-green canals and stone dragons perched on bridges—a city nestled among the mountains, sparkling with amber diamond lights—quickly dissolved into a smoke-shadowed fantasy of pointy-eared canines, lips drawn over black gums and drooling teeth—darting, foaming, snarling, and otherwise dominating all walkways of the city.

“I really don’t know when the last time I had a rabies shot was, grade school maybe? ...What am I supposed to do?”

“Well, you’ll have to get a new one—and the documents to prove it. We do have a clinic here at the airport, though it’s closed on Sundays and Mondays.”

I turned to Sam. “What day is it?”

“Sunday,” she said.

“Damn.”

The attendant smiled thinly.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to get a vaccination until this evening,” I told her, “which means I’ll have to find new domestic flights. I have a long layover in Germany, though, so perhaps I can keep that one?”

“We can certainly rebook your flights to accommodate your situation,” she said. “But for that I’m going to transfer you over to Dolores at the outstanding service desk.”

She waved us to the left, then promptly vanished behind an employees-only door.

“I can’t believe this,” Sam said. “This is some type of crazy shit that only happens in quirky travel films.”

I could feel a torrent of anxiety bubbling up from some deep pit of suppressed emotion, but it seemed the dull weight of my disbelief was keeping a lid on it.

“I’m happy to stay as long as I can,” Sam was saying, “but my shift does start at one-thirty today, so I’ll have to be leaving in about half an hour.”

“Yes, thank you, of course,” I said. “I’m sure we can get it sorted out by then.” Reality dawned on me. “My apartment. I turned in my key. I don’t have a place to stay. Or a way to get these stupid vaccinations. I—I don’t—”

Sam cut in: “Look. Here’s the plan. You stay with me tonight—I have a fold-out couch. You come to work with me when we’re done here, schedule your vaccinations from the coffee shop. Depending on how late the clinics are open, we can go tonight when I get off or first thing in the morning. Then we get you back here in time for your new flight—which this Dolores is going to find for us.” She peered over the empty desk.

I exhaled, all chaos and relief. “Thank you, Sam. For everything.”

“Of *course*.” She punched my shoulder. “Although, if this really *was* a quirky travel film, Owen Wilson would probably show up about now, with a—with someone else—Jason Schwartzman, right? Pretending to be a travel journalist and photographer duo—”

“But they’re really looking for a mysterious family heirloom,” I said.

“And you get caught up in their search party by accident. And you’re trying to get this little European airline to give you their last available plane, but get this. Everyone who works for the airline is played by Ralph Fiennes—the hostess, the pilot, the flight attendant—all him.”

I laughed. “With a little yellow scarf tied around his neck.”

Ralph Fiennes was regrettably not our next point of contact with the airline. Manning the desk in his preferable stead came a small-statured, wiry-haired woman in a pencil skirt and pantyhose. She routinely signed on the monitor and offered her attention. After briefing her on the situation, she blinked behind round, black-rimmed glasses and set upon the hunt for alternative tickets, muttering to herself while she did so.

Finally: “Let’s see here, mm hmm. Yes. New flight seven-o-seven-five to Chicago at one thirty-five tomorrow afternoon—then a connecting from there to Munich, Germany at four-twenty...”

Sam mimed lighting a cigarette.

“Which puts you in Munich at approximately eight a.m. the following morning.” She smiled.

“And the flight to Ljubljana?” I asked.

“Beg pardon?”

“I have a third flight with Lufthansa—to Ljubljana—in Slovenia?”

“Oh.” More clattering. “Ljub—Ljubl—?”

“Ljubljana, yes.”

“Well I’ve never heard of such a place before.”

I tried not to express my blatant incredulity to Sam.

“It’s in Europe,” I said. “Next to Austria? Across the Adriatic Sea from Italy...if that helps.”

“Okay, well let’s see... Now that’s with Ljubljana—ah no, sorry—*Lufthansa*, that’s it. Okay, let’s pull up their...their roster here and look at flights to Slovakia.”

“Slovenia.”

“Right.”

Another series of quiet minutes followed, during which time several new travelers entered the queue. Dolores was kind enough to inform us, the confusion mounting on her face, that she could not access Lufthansa’s flight schedule. She wheeled around her monitor, giving us an unhelpful glimpse of a screen riddled with green lines of data on a black background.

“See? But...I do have them on hold, so what I’m going to do,” she thrust her corded black telephone into my hand. “So we don’t have to keep anyone waiting; just give me a wave if they pick up, okay?”

She shuffled to the neighboring kiosk, waving up the gentleman behind us. Sam and I exchanged looks of bewilderment. A warped jingle of music *wee-opped* through the earpiece.

“What the hell?”

Sam shrugged. “Guess we get to talk to them ourselves.”

I stared down at the tile floor, the lining of a suitcase—miniscule details you never notice until you’re caught between them and immobility—suddenly numerous and small and overwhelming enough to drown you. *What was I doing?*

“Okay so Ralph Fiennes flies you to the city,” Sam continued. “But the heirloom is up in the mountains—in the Alps.”

“So Owen Wilson rents this old motorcycle with a sidecar,” I added. “And the three of us take it up the mountain pass. The heirloom is supposedly inside a hidden cave. But there’s an old woman living there—”

“Tilda Swinton, and she’s this mystic turned nun who’s been living out of time. She doesn’t have the heirloom, but she knows where to find it. The only problem is, an old mountain goat ate the map, but she claims she can speak to it.”

“So we have to ride back down the mountain, this time with the motorcycle hitched to a cart carrying Tilda Swinton and her mystic goat—”

“And everyone’s wearing vintage aviator goggles!”

“Ah, this great—you have to be there too,”

“I can drop by in a parachute,” Sam said, “—with Edward Norton. He found out Jason Schwartzman forgot his allergy medicine and had to bring it to him.”

“And due to some land skirmish, or—I don’t know—the city being overrun by rabid dogs—we have to get to the next stop—”

“Revealed by the goat, with voice acting from the incomparable Jeff Goldblum.”

“Right—but we have to get there by boat. So we find the dock, but there’s only one boat left—”

“And it’s Bill Murray’s boat, of course.”

“He’s with Waris Ahluwalia, is it?—in a wildly colorful turban. And they let everyone come on board except Edward Norton for some reason.”

“Ah, man,” said Sam with respect in her voice. “You can always count on *The Belafonte* for a good rescue...”

Once our little drama built itself up to vast and undeniable proportions, Sam glanced at her watch.

“Well,” she said, “I’m already going to be about ten minutes late, which I can get by with, but I really should get going so it’s not any worse. Do you want to just call them yourself from the coffee shop?”

“I have all the receipts from my original flights. That should be enough, do you think?”

Unwinding the telephone cord from my finger and pulling the earpiece away from my ear—I waved to Dolores.

“You get ahold of Ljubljana?”

“Lufthansa,” I said. “And no, we have to go now, but thank you for your help.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay. Well...good luck.”

In typical, inexplicable fashion, the airport’s parking garage organized their levels not by letter or number—but by animal. Each floor, and subsequent button in the elevator, was decorated with an anthropomorphic creature presumably native to the area. We stepped into the lift and blanked.

“I think we’re on the bear,” Sam said.

“I thought it was the stork.”

“I don’t think it’s the alligator.”

She pressed the button with the bear.

“You know, the airport once offered me the chance to design their parking garage animals for them, when they were first building it.”

This came as no surprise. Sam had artwork all over the city.

“I ended up doing a mural instead. You’ll have to take a look at it tomorrow when you get to where the gates are.”

If—I get there.

It turned out Sam’s car wasn’t on the bear *or* the stork level. It was on level armadillo. Of course.

I spent a collective three and a half hours on hold from the comfort of Sam’s coffee shop—an unapologetically hipster space branded The Beaver’s Dam. While I settled at the long bar styled in a plank of rough-textured wood, Sam lost herself in the rhythm of grinding espresso and stirring iced lattes. Connecting with a representative of Lufthansa Airlines and recounting my tragic plight, I was briskly informed that seeing as *they* had not been the ones to reschedule nor administer my original flight plan, they were *therefore* not responsible, and *as such*, could not reschedule my flight to Ljubljana from their end of the situation. I would need to mend the incomplete travel plans with the original, *American* airline—seeing as a calamity of such inefficiency could only occur under American administration.

I thanked them—and promptly returned to cellular limbo, waiting for the original airline to answer my call. The final attendant proved, by grace, proficient—“a real team player,” Sam remarked—placing me on a new flight to Ljubljana. My only setback stemmed from infrequent flights into the city, resulting in an extended now twenty-six hour layover in Germany. *Nun ja*. Sam simultaneously scored an appointment with a local clinic, going so far as to schedule it from her own phone—the shop devoid of customers—altering the tone of her voice and closing with a brusque, “Thanks so much. See you in the morning.”

§

PART IV: WHEEL

Fire fed on the night air—licking, lashing, bright tongues in the darkness. We rested our feet on its oblong, concrete altar, legs outstretched from thrones of outdoor leisure. A wooden bowl of popcorn sat between us, and a pitcher of wildly spruced sangria—Sam having tossed in splashes of whiskey, apple juice, a spritz of lemon, I don't know what else—caught the firelight in ribbons of yellow and white, the wine itself glowing a crimson, ruby red. The blood of the sun, it was. Each drink felt like a wish, as if its opulent glory could somehow thread through our own veins, transfer to us the same depth of strength. We'd already drunk half the mixture.

Sam bent forward—arm outstretched to twist a puff of popcorn in the open flame, pinned as it was between a pair of chopsticks. She blew on the blackened morsel, then flicked it into her mouth. I gazed through the fire and across the courtyard of her complex. Vacant hammocks swung between palm trunks, a giant chess set resting in the tipsy impasse in which we'd left it. No kingdoms conquered; no campaigns won. Between two of the buildings stretched a waste of marshland, cresting to a hill at the horizon from which rose a neon, glittering wheel and beside it a flashing pinnacle of light. A Ferris wheel and a drop tower—the Eye and the Needle. Even from your own backyard the great, sleepless machinations churned. Colors shattered and surged back in again, constant in the cycle, toting their passengers for one short rotation in their tiny little bubbles.

I massaged the bridge of my nose. What did this place mean to me? Nothing? Where was the meaning, if it all meant nothing? I'd been so sure of myself in needing to get out—out of the circle, this inescapable tour of the unreality of life. The fabricated-wonder capital of the world. Its wheel turned behind my eyes even now, and I rode its capsules of unrealized possibility. Where was Johnnie tonight? Did he have other lovers he met on other separate, impersonal corners? What if I'd been honest with him—in any way at all? If I'd allowed myself to be more than physically vulnerable? And the barista from the coffee shop—gorgeous what-if? What if I'd spoken to him? Would we be holding hands in the wheel tonight—head

on his shoulder, eyes lost in neon fire? Would fireworks have bloomed above us, if I'd given this city just a little more trust?

Disillusionment. The word seared in sparkler-stars across my vision. Disillusionment—haunting me since I got here, following me still. What could I see? Some great metaphor in the landscape? Lakes drawing mythical revelations on their black mirror surfaces? I knew only my own story, and it was disenchantment, fabrication, inaction—things lost and not understood—all throughout. That was the lonely truth of my own private Orlando—what made it private, what made it my own. I found myself driven, on a night I hadn't even intended to be there, grasping to understand, to repair, to validate it still.

A loud crunch of popcorn shocked me from my fantastic despair.

"You know," Sam said, swallowing. "I think I could do with another cactus for my studio."

The night hung soft and sluggish on our shoulders. I lost my gaze in the flames, praying their hypnotic ballet would cleanse my brain of its sparkling torments.

"And now that I think about it...it would have been so much easier, even just *nice*, you know? If this friend of yours had given you a heads up about the whole rabid dog problem."

"Maybe he didn't know," I said. "Maybe it's not all that bad."

"Yeah..." Her voice drifted to a sleepy mumble. "I think the universe just wanted to make sure you really wanted this trip..."

"Sam, what am I doing here?"

"What?"

"I don't mean 'here' in the sense of life. I mean 'here' in this *part* of life."

"None of us know what we're doing."

"No, I know, but I mean, I really don't know what I'm doing." I struggled for words—was it the confusion or the alcohol? "It's just, yesterday I was wandering this beautiful haze of a farewell, and everything felt so—*music video*, you know? Like I was walking down this multicolored carpet—like a *runway*. But then—all these forces *collapsed*, and I got held back. And now all that reassurance, it mutated into all this doubt and second guessing, and what if I'm supposed to stay here—what if there's something I didn't do, something I didn't say? I can't bear the

thought...but I don't even know what it is... What was it I wanted?" I snorted. "I mean, I guess it doesn't matter now. Whatever it was, it's long since been lost."

Sam lifted her glass. "I can't give you any answers to that. I can only give you a good time."

I laughed.

"I'm serious," she said, spilling wine into her mug. *Is This Real Life?* looped across its glass surface in a wavy rainbow font. She knocked it against mine. "To this moment."

"To this moment," I said.

We drank, and my imagination unwound its reel of undeveloped film.

If this were a movie...

I stopped short.

If this were a movie... I don't think anything would be different.

I closed one eye and tilted my head. Staring across the tropical heath at this angle, the flames of our fire pit seemed to crawl up the Ferris wheel. A long-forked tree of lightning, splitting the sky in breathless blue, lighted upon the drop tower like the finger of God, and the needle snapped in two—a jagged, white crack. As it sank, I saw stones split, a crown topple from a great height. A young man playing a passionate pianoforte among the clouds—thrown from his seat—sank in slow motion, torso bent, arms outstretched. Falling but with nowhere to land. From its lids of flame, the eye burned electric, vindictive green. It burned—but didn't blind.

Departure could prove a violent thing to the soul. To leave felt to leave undone. But could I stare eye to burning eye, the dream in the liquid mirror, and accept it for what it was? Incomplete, unchanged—divine.

Could I say—*I see you*—and mean it?

Could I leave here unconfined?

§

PART V: CANVAS

Waking to the angry whine of a power blender, I sat up on the sofa bed, catching sight of my messy hair in the blank screen of the television. From her stance in the kitchen, Sam waited for the blender to finish, then turned with her hands on her hips.

“I forgot I had a meeting this morning,” she announced. Her hair was done up in messy ringlets, but she hadn’t yet changed out of her bathrobe and fluffy cactus slippers. “I have to meet with my assistant manager to fire the new kid.”

“Another one?” I said.

“Yep.”

“What happened this time?”

“Fell asleep on the job.”

“At the counter?”

“At a *table*.”

“Ouch.”

“I can drop you off at the clinic so you don’t miss your appointment, but I don’t know how long the meeting will go. These baristas can get pretty emotional on you.”

“It’s okay, really. I can get a ride to the airport.”

“You sure?” Sam clapped her hands together. “Look at us—just pulling through. I made smoothies; there’s coffee in the pot. Bathroom, as you know, is around the corner in case you want to freshen up for your big flight.”

I stared out the window with a vacant smile, the early sun-brushed palm trees hardly reminiscent of last night’s fantasies. *Day of departure—take two*. Leaning off the sofa I rummaged through my luggage for a fresh pair of clothes and

toothbrush. There was a certain romantic charm to living out of your suitcase, I decided—something appealing in the concept of assuming, if temporarily, the role of a modern nomad.

Having pulled both suitcases from the trunk of Sam's car, I closed the lid and gave it two good pats of finality. She stuck her head out the driver's window, her freckles lit up around yellow-lensed sunglasses like stars around the sun.

"For some reason I feel like we already said goodbye."

"I'm going to miss you," I said. "Truly."

"Have fun in Ljubljana, old man," she grinned. Pulling out of the clinic parking lot, she threw up a peace sign in the air.

I watched her speed out of sight.

Considering they were the cause of such vexation—and no small expense for my uninsured ass—both vaccinations (one required, the other "advisable") were administered in a ridiculously short amount of time. Two little mermaid band-aids and less than an hour later, I was back on the sidewalk, papers in hand, toting my antique suitcases and a book bag. I called for a city cab, placing my luggage once more in the trunk and settling myself in the backseat. It's difficult now to imagine stealing my last glimpse of the city from anywhere but the window of that cab. The removed, impersonal quality of the experience all seemed strangely therapeutic.

I spared the terminal a mere establishing glance. Even then, on a different day at a different time, it proved no less a horde of unorganized waiting lines. And yet—frenetic though it was, I couldn't help but sense a curious undercurrent of spiritualism. Families approached the desks like coming before the altar of some unknown, legendary deity, their cubes of luggage offered up like sacrifices that the invisible power, whatever it was, and whose priests were the unassuming airline hosts and hostesses, might accept their valued gifts and grant them their hearts' desires.

Just get me off the ground, I thought, entering a queue of my own. Get me out of this country and all will be well.

Was I really that desperate to leave America? —Is that really what I wanted? I studied the by-now-memorized patterns in the tile floor, studied the feel of their familiar ridges beneath my shoes, the rhythm of the announcements coming in overhead. My whole life felt composed of these moments—jumping from bubble to bubble and waiting in the spaces between them: the lobbies of airports, of hotels; gas stations; bookstores and libraries; the bench under that tree; the end of that dock—so much to the point that I couldn't tell what home was. I'd limited my perspective by thinking of home in a singular sense. Home was not and never had been one unmoving place—but fixed points across time and space. Too sacred to be any one thing, it was made of pieces—a series of memories, people, pages, places.

The airline host waved me forward. I slid my passport and newly acquired documents across the desk.

“Checking in for my flight to Chicago—long term to Ljubljana.”

Dividing the entrance terminal from the gates and their runways wound the elevated track of a multi-cabined shuttle. It dipped over palm trees, parking lots, clusters of construction, fields of brown, desiccated grass. During the brief crossing, a voiceover from the city mayor recited a message in his thick Southern drawl. I caught only the tail end of it.

“...much this city has to offer, I'm sure you didn't get to experience it all. Please come back again; we'll be waiting for you—here, at the city beautiful.”

It wasn't until they were about to announce the first call for boarding that I remembered Sam's comment about her commissioned painting. It was here in the terminal somewhere, and I had to see it. As the airline attendant approached the boarding desk, I shouldered my book bag and jostled away from the gate. I'm not sure what it was that compelled me—loyalty to Sam's friendship, some notion the piece would offer a visually satisfying perspective on the past two years as a whole—I don't know. Following the willful, possibly foolish pull in my chest, I traveled back into the funnel of traffic. There was the platform where the shuttle docked; there, the circular antechamber of restaurants, a fountain sparkling beneath the glass ceiling; and there, hallways branching like veins from the heart. Sam's painting had to be down one of those.

I rotated my vantage point, straining for a glimpse down each tunnel. I'd seen pictures, samples of her work before. She often painted on tiny squares of wood, but

for a commission I was sure they were typically larger. And she'd said *mural*—I remembered now—choosing a hallway and darting ahead, gaze sweeping. I couldn't understand this frantic, desperate need to see the piece, but the feeling only increased the more I considered it, and I let it guide me like a compass.

Passing gates and waiting lounges, my phone vibrated from inside my pocket.

Probably a warning text from the airline telling me to get my ass back, they're boarding, I thought.

Absently I pulled it out and prepared to flick the message away, when I caught sight of the sender's name. Johnnie.

I want to have sex with you.

Who the hell wants to have sex at one in the afternoon? I thought.

I turned the corner, and there it was.

The painting.

It washed over me like a wave; had it been a moving thing, it could have. Mounted at the end of an otherwise nonfunctional hallway—framed by two bay windows and glowing in the sight of runways and an endless breadth of sky—the canvas stretched from the length of my shins to above my head. Behind me, the travelers, in their purposed revolving and searching, blurred to speeds of incalculable pace—stopped frozen. Drawing me to itself, the piece transformed to an ocean of time. And I let myself drown in it.

An abstract sort of landscape it was—at a distance. Soft cloud blue melted into a hungry, raging marine, swaths scattered, blending, fighting for attention, for your story. One moment, a sun-cracked road—snaking away into the wilderness—settled beside it a ramshackle, perhaps vacant country home. Familiar, foreboding. Next, the soft dipping hills of the ocean floor, grass turning to seaweed and reeds, the home to a sunken ship—only ghosts living there. Then an oddly familiar moor—the setting at once universal and uniquely its own: one private wasteland of swamp and sun and loneliness. *Was* this a wasteland? Or was it heaven?

Or was it the end?

The answer lay in the vast, innumerable, shapeless clues, which swam and curled and spelled—in, across, parallel to—each other. Dripping dribbles of jagged blood red; slashing sunspots of yellow; time-lost, wistful accents of sand; and the aching blue of regret. Faint tracings of charcoal, splotches, drops—leapt and fell,

clamored into being like the ever-moving remains of the soul, creatures of a life-breathing god. I found the road, again—traced the lightning stripes, my lilac clouds, the raging dusk apocalypse. Whisperings of the coiled snake, mouth wide, still swallowing. Low tones of the hollow whales, the played-by-night pianos. Drifting drifters—and there again spun the eye. Sacred. Malicious. Required.

I traced the patterns, the currents of my life fragmented. Scattered numbers on a broken pocket watch—time measured in symbols of horror, music notes, and words—lifting from the surface, melding together. If the words became birds, and the books became rooks, perched on the tips of black lightning trees, and the sky became the sea—had the sun turned to a submarine? Was that Steve Zissou coming to save me? A rescue at last—the divine, cinematic intervention I'd been dreaming of all this time. A light in the depths—a tap on the shoulder and I'd turn and—there would stand the immaterial savior.

But the pieces held not still—skitter-skipping up and down the steps, attempting to trace all tail ends of the fireworks. Stars showered, and invisible lips, sewn across a deck of Arthurian cards, answered in legends and the spilling of blood. A coldness seeped here—a quest to affirm myself in the pursuit of truths unacknowledged but somehow understood. *With flaming sword in hand and the disaffected distance of solitude by which to prove himself, the young knight approached the creature's labyrinth.* Who was I to dream a king and live a fool?

The waves rocked me to their cool and briny floor. No rescuer was coming. No film was ticking in its reel. I had a fate to choose. I had a path to traverse. An orchestra swelled behind every possible door. Sinister. Promising. Alone and unmoored. Black letters drifted from the painting's fluid, invisible pages.

And do you even beat your own heart? they asked.

In the eye of a tattoo, the eye of a serpent; in the eye of a firestorm, the eye of a sabretooth's skeleton. Caught in the twisting scales, pinned in the raging clouds. In the eyes of the world, strangers bent over a green marble counter—I lost my inhibitions. In the eye of the Ferris wheel I found my callous salvation. In the eyes of desolation I unearthed the most beautiful things.

The high *sheen*—*whoosh* of a plane lifting from the runway and the dig of the phone in my hand abruptly called to mind my more immediate, corporeal circumstances. In a daze of refocus, like setting lightly on the grass after a long, hard fall, I skimmed the edges of the painting, traced the borders of the canvas. I

felt anchored in its waves of instability. Silhouetted in its dark blue, held firm in the centerpiece of a spinning world. A tiny white plaque hung outside one corner. Sam's name, the painting's measurements and materials—and the title, printed in thin, dark letters.

Reconcile.

I pulled myself from the current of the painting, turned to bleed into that of the crowd. A sea of travelers, monsters, nomads—wandering souls with destinations down tunnels-of-time passageways—pulled me under and back to the surface.

I spared my phone another glance, and, trembling, began to type. I reread the message in a frantic trance, knowing if I so much as hesitated I'd lose my hold on the courage needed to follow through with it—then, Send.—and in a breath of finality, blocked all contact with its recipient. Withstanding tears, I drew out my passport and boarding pass, feeling their slender weight beneath my fingers.

Receive me, oh sky. Transport me. Transform.

The film unwound dizzily—framed the carpeted, voyeuristic, multi-tunneled road. Like an overturned throne, it spilled—paint; ocean; fire; wine—running across life, running rivulets into the future.

§

PART VI: EPILOGUE

At six twenty-one in the morning I stepped from the rotating glass doors, such as they use at expensive hotels, and surveyed the wide expanse of stone that was the courtyard of Munich Germany's international airport.

Soundless hung the morning, the lights sparse and misty golden that winked from the windows of offices and hotels, unopened convenience stores ringing the scene like a fortress. I began to cross. Angular swaths of canvas dipped above, shielding the gray and muted sky. At the far end, two escalators rolled—one, to the parking lot and hotels, the other down into a subway tunnel. I ascended, pausing for a moment to gaze across the empty stones and glass walls of the airport—terminals miniscule from here. Beyond stretched the impenetrable mist-strewn dawn

I left behind the airport, found passage through a tunnel beneath the floors of an office. Depositing me at the furthest edge of the grounds, my shoes hugged the smooth black river of a road. It spun away into the fog, meeting deep green ridges of trees and dense, overhung clouds. Not a person was visible—no car nor attendant nor traveler. Only myself, consoled by the gray and the road and the dawn.

I felt then I might step forward—a stranger, a foreigner, unknown to anyone in the city at all—and let the road draw me away into who knows where. I knew nothing of what lay on the other side, save distant memories of trains and bicycles, cobblestones, gargoyles. But standing there, alone, moored only to that which had been my unmooring, I felt that anything I had dreamt of knowing but had not yet known, all the unglimped visions of the soul—waited, without breathing, without stirring, from the other side of the fog—here, in the in-between, a place not even my destination. I stood on the road's edge for some time, lost in the distance, until the mist began to dissolve, and the sun, glowing white and formless, broke between the ranks of the clouds.

