

I do not sleep.

Not well, at least.

It's my fault. I left my sleeping bag in Florence as a symbol of newfound maturity after renouncing this ridiculous idea of sleeping in the woods. But now I am ridiculous, and also cold. I wear all of my clothes and wrap myself in the tarp and small curtain. But I awake soaked in dew and my body never dries. I shiver all night, tossing in the dirt.

Finally, gray pinks my eyelids with light and I roll flat on my back, staring up at the sky

Small birds rustle in an elm tree above. A few flutter off their branches and plunge their wings up and down up and down, catapulting themselves into the wide expanse. The light is becoming white, antiseptic. It colds through my body as I think: *Someday I will be like that bird, my life like a tiny pair of wings being flung into an expansive sea.*

I should stop all this talk of death. I am young. Twenty-four years old. The cold drives me out of the tarp and out of all my layers. I pull on a single pair of leggings and a white shirt and roll up my belongings, tying them into a pack. Then I tie up my boots and walk down the hill to the dirt road.

The sun conquers slowly, stroking the gray away with light.



When I find my original camp spot, I drop both packs and pull out a garden shovel from the daypack.

Beneath the oak tree, between the ancient roots, I begin digging. By the time the sun has awakened fully, the hole is three feet deep. I hike to a Medieval fortress down the road to gather slabs of worn wood, which I use to reinforce the dirt walls of the hole. I place the survival pack inside, cover it with a slab of wood, a large stone, rocks, dirt, and vines. When I finish, it looks natural, nothing interesting for a passing hiker to investigate.

I take a string of prayer beads from my pack, a gift from a Muslim friend in Turkey. Each bead is blue with a white circle in the middle. "They will protect you from the evil eye," she told me, and I noticed suddenly that they were tiny eyes, appraising me. I don't know exactly what the "evil eye" means, but here in this small clump of bushes the beads mean companionship, mean that somewhere there are people who love me. I hang them on a small branch by the dirt where I will sleep.

Blue emboldens the sky as I look around camp and see my ideas crystallized. I now have a secret camp in a clump of thorny, vine-covered bushes and trees. In Spain, no less. In Girona. It may be nothing but a clump of earth cells, but my chest contracts warmly as I see the covered pit, the tarp on the ground, the prayer beads swaying from the tree branch. In me swells a warmth like the sensation of home.

*Home.* Now that is a word worth holding. The first sound like an exhale, but the “m” catching it mid-escape, boundarizing the syllable so it can mean a thing. A consonant like a wall. My walls never stayed in place. We moved every year of my childhood and youth, like we were fleeing—poverty, probably. My dad worked hard, but the ten of us always landed short of getting by. I learned to find comfort in the constant sensation of change. Places were impersonal backdrops for school or work. I made friends easily but remained aloof. I read and wrote and lingered always on the boundaries, watching. From the margins, looking in, I learned people in communities are strange animals. Almost always, they are acting.

I press the pen to a new page.

*Solitude is the solution. We must test the integrity of each thought before the open sky.*

But the sky is not so easily flattered. As I sit in the dirt and stare upward, my thoughts begin to reorganize. *We must grind our words to dust and let them fertilize the earth.*

I dig my fingers into the dirt, as if probing for thought-remnants. I close my notebook, rise to my feet, and hike back to the city to find the university library.

There, I breathe the air-conditioned cold as I wander the aisles of books, fan the pages, feel the words with my fingers like braille. I sit at a desk and open a massive book of art, full of colored photographs of old paintings. I flip through the pages until my eyes burn dry.

Then I sit back and watch the sky fall apart, its light fractured and gushing gold over ancient stones. The cathedral bell tolls the hour, sonorous and deep. The wind lifts a flag on the building across the street, under a window that appears to be asleep.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,* I think, Shakespeare ringing in my brain as I head back to camp to sleep.



My boyfriend did not approve of Spain.

His name is David, and he is everywhere.

His cologne rises up from a stranger’s collar, his face looms imminent before every corner, his arms are holding me now as I struggle to sleep—

He doesn’t write me anymore. He said he would no longer play victim to the fragility of my love, how I string him along deeper and deeper and then suddenly look at him like a stranger and say I just need “time.”

“Again and again,” he said (and here I always sighed). “What you don’t know is that we are soulmates and all the time in the world can’t change the way we jive,” he said.

*So, you see?* I think.

He loves me, even if he no longer writes.



I awake wondering about the strangeness of love, my notebook cracked open in hopes of illumination.

I’m not thinking of the excitement of a new connection, like the one shared with the boy a few nights past. I’m thinking about the trace that lingers after a connection of immense proportions. This trace is not even so tangible as a memory. It’s a color, like the blue of David’s eyes. It’s the circle of cold that a warm mug leaves behind. I think it is the voice that has trailed me through the streets of Italy, Turkey, and Spain: a presence like an absence, a bullet left in the body.

And I knew I was done for the first moment David approached me. I was sitting on a bench when I saw his leather loafers and looked up from my book.

“You’re in my Arabic class,” I said.

His eyes smiled through a pair of unfashionable glasses. “What are you reading?”

Something about the Middle East, supplementary reading for my minor. We talked about politics and traveling, and being with him was strange, as if we had talked on this bench a thousand times before. I tried to shake him throughout the day. But the next afternoon I sat on that same bench at the same time, reading.

“Hi again,” he said, and I feigned surprise.

“Oh hello,” I made room for him on the bench. “How are you?”

His face teased with that confident smile. “I don’t have much time, but can I have your number?”

“Um, sure. Maybe we can hang out sometime.” I typed my number into his phone, too nervous to say the word “date.”

He held my gaze, his face thoughtful. “I’ll see you soon,” he said. And he left me on that little bench. *Our little bench*, as we’d come to call it. He picked me up that Friday and we went to Barnes and Noble’s, where we drank hot chocolate and wandered the aisles, talking about everything. I kept marveling that we had only just met. We found a globe, put our fingers on it and spun. Where would we travel next? He was going to Russia, I to the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. We laughed.

And then I said, “I am actually going to Spain next summer.” I watched him and his eyes stayed open, waiting. So I told him about my plans to live in the woods. I struggled to give a reason. “As a sort of experiment,” I ventured.

As we sat at the base of a plastic tree in the children’s section, as he listened quietly, I felt that he knew my reasons better than I did. He always knew. He saw straight through my excuses, my flightiness, my pleas for “time.” He saw me from the start, just as if he were born with me, lived with me, and meant to take me to my grave. How can I run from a love like that?

*It chases me through the streets.*



I am sleeping very little.

I dug a hole, which helped relieve the discomfort of a hip grinding into the hard dirt, but the cold still gnaws me hungrily each night.

My goal is now to sleep as late and long as possible. Sleep comes easier when the sun is out to heat the leaves and soil beneath me. While I wait for warmth, I read Plato’s *Republic*, which is much drier than philosophy professors claim, and Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which is deeply embarrassing.

Then I sleep for another hour or so. When my eyes struggle open, I can’t possibly sleep longer. My legs itch to explore the streets. I find a big *mercat*, where I buy a few cans of beans and whole grain bread, and a few days later, a plastic bin of crackers. Then I walk back at dusk and find the university library, open and beating with the hearts of a billion words arranged in the bodies of books.

The books are beautiful in a way that nature is not—the books are crammed with human frailty, and that touches me. The sun begins laying its rays horizontally over the earth. I find my forest path and walk home, passing a few people walking dogs, some who nod and most who look carefully away.

While they look carefully away, I walk freely, and the sun splatters hotly through the streets.



Back to the library again—beans and bread in the university courtyard, books and writing.

I write about the boy with the dog. I write about David. I wish I could purge all this love from my veins, but it bleeds as liberally as the Spanish sun, painting innocent passersby with its heat.

*I have all kinds of oceans raging inside me. I have all kinds of skies.*

Then I stop writing and start thinking practically.

I will wash my hair, as it feels greasy when I brush it. There are too many tourists by the angel fountain during the day, so I wait until dusk for privacy, but not until dark, so that my hair has time to dry before I sleep.

I leave the library as the sun starts imploding, streaking entrails of peach and nectarine across the faded sky-sheet. I walk through streets and gardens until I arrive at the vine-covered fountain, drop my bag, and look around. The street and garden are empty. I turn on the fountain, duck my head beneath it, and run my fingers through my hair, letting the water slide between the strands and soak my scalp with cold.

When I turn off the fountain and lift my head, I see an elderly man strolling by and he meets my gaze with a smile. “Hace calor, eh?” he laughs. “Sí, mucho calor,” I say, and sit down on the stone steps, wringing out my hair until he rounds the corner out of view.

Then I pull out the shampoo from my pack and squeeze it into my scalp, lathering quickly and placing my head under the fountain again. When the water runs clear and I lift my head, no one is watching, and I smile in relief. I brush my hair quickly, ringing out as much water as I can before I pick up my pack and walk briskly through the city streets, letting the wind blow it dry.

I feel victorious, in spite of myself.

I feel I have accomplished some feat of independence, in spite of myself

And I think of the boy, in spite of myself. He had messaged me on Facebook, said he wanted to see me soon.

And when he did, I would greet him with clean, apple-scented hair.



To celebrate, I buy a muffin at a café.

The next day, actually, so maybe it wasn't a direct celebration of washing my hair. Maybe it was a celebration of life, or maybe it was a justification.

I sit at an outdoor table and watch the pigeons bob their heads for crumbs, shuffling their small feet behind them. The muffin is not as good as I expect it to be, and I feel bad for having spent the extra money.

The heat radiates from the cobblestones beneath, magnetizing me into a drowsy half-sleep. I bob my head like the pigeons, fighting dreams, until I finally snap to attention and rise to my feet. I escape to the air-conditioned library to write.

I awaken in the cool indoor air, writing fifty pages of a book that I am still living. How can I weave meaning into a story with an unknown ending? I pull descriptions from my notebook, the action centering around the boy. He will be the mysterious lover, I decide. I brainstorm ways this book could end.

Scenario number one: I stay in Spain. After this month in the woods, I find a real job and then rent a flat. I keep writing books, and the boy keeps writing songs. Soon he realizes that our feelings are a feasible thing, and we enter a love affair rooted in independence and passionate creativity. I barely know the boy, so this is, of course, a fantasy. But perhaps I could stay for the sea, for the Medieval buildings and for Gaudí.

Scenario number two: I fly back to the United States. I enter the cool productivity of a focused college student and stop seeking adventures in far-off places. I choose David. *Was there ever another choice?*

*Yes. There are always other choices if we are brave enough to part with the safe and the good.*

I shut the laptop, close my eyes, and surrender to thinking. No, absorbing. There is another language lurking deep beneath the sentences of this page. It's the language of those who are tuned to the primal beat of things, to the air-conditioned gray of the library, the carpet stifling the gentle wind of students breathing, clearing their throats, crossing and uncrossing their legs, typing.

After a few long breaths, my brain becomes clean as a slip of paper, undulating gently. I see the window and the sun through it. The library is carpeted and the students are meek, engrossed in stale old books that have long since stopped their breathing. I notice my breath begins to match the boy's in the cubicle next to me, until I shake my head and flick my eyes to the bookshelves, trying to go inward instead.

*Is conformity such a plague, anyway? Or is it how we connect?*

Perhaps we stand stiff and learn our lessons so that one day we may sing in unison, free *por fin* from all these pesky, misshapen selves.

In the library we are caught up in cool spaces and quiet books. Outside, the sun stalks hotly through the streets.



I had only mentioned Spain that day to remind him.

David already knew, of course, as I had told him on our very first date.

But, he countered, “I thought things had changed.”

He meant that we had fallen in love. “Well, they have,” I admitted, glancing up from my laptop. We were at the library, studying. “But I can’t just abandon my plans.”

“I can come with you,” he offered, but I shook my head vigorously as I checked a citation, not even bothering to meet his eyes. This must have angered him, because soon we were arguing in biting whispers. Then he was wiping wetness from his eyes and I was dragging him to some nearby bookshelves so the students would stop glaring.

We sat on the floor between the shelves and held hands. I didn’t speak, because I had nothing significant to say.

“I’m sorry,” he started. “I just don’t know why you’d want to leave me. You know I would never leave you.”

I stared at our hands, the way his tented mine as if to protect. Then I glanced at the bookshelves and scanned the titles quickly, feeling my right foot begin tapping beneath my folded legs.

“I...” I began, to buy time. *London’s Lost Rivers*, I read, and *The Complete Language of Flowers*. “I’m not leaving you, like you said. I am leaving, but not you.” I didn’t know what I was saying.

“Sondra, I just...don’t know what you’re looking for. I want you to be happy. But you’ll leave in the spring and come back in the fall and you’ll be the same woman and we’ll be just as in love.”

I smiled slightly, in spite of his pain. *As if love were a thing that endures*. His hands pressed warmly into mine as I thought, *every day I’m a new woman with a new love waiting*.



Well, we are all of us foolish when we’re young, I comforted myself in Italy.

I would go home and marry him—yes maybe even marry him! —and we’d settle down and buy a house and perhaps birth a few blue-eyed lovelies, compact and sharp-witted like David. The images flickered dimly, persistently through my pack-supported head on a park bench. I was in an ugly suburb of Florence, and the scene was everything you wouldn’t expect from an exotic trip to Italy: muggy, mediocre scenery. The patchy grass of a neglected park beside a dingy gas station where I used the bathroom and didn’t buy anything. My stomach howled with hunger while my camera sat buried in my pack, superfluous here.

And I thought: *I am tired of this*.

I had started the summer in Rome, working on a sailboat moored in the Tiber River in exchange for room and board. The boat owner was a foul-mouthed Scot enamored with Rome's good, cheap wine. Then there was the young Spaniard who arrived before me, a bushy-bearded man whose muscular arms were patterned with tattoos. While I scrubbed at an algae-encrusted lifeboat during the day, the Spaniard worked on a complicated project in the engine room, emerging in a shroud of white dust when he needed air or a glass of water. I trailed him through the boat with a broom, cleaning up after him.

The Tiber River is darkly polluted, and one of our chores was to keep the trash moving through its veins. We wielded long-hooked metal poles to nudge the wading microwaves, shoes, bottles, and chairs down their way, pushing the problem to another boat. And I thought, *a river is like a transparent earth*. Stocked with the relics of centuries, we watch objects from people dead or alive decompose before our eyes.

It was a little sickening living directly above this waste, on a boat which rocked gently in its filth while we slept. One night I dreamt that I fell into the river while moving the trash methodically with my metal hook, the waters filling my lungs with its phlegmy pus.

And then Paul joined us, a middle-aged Northern Irishman with an accent so strong that I waited seconds before responding to anything he said, just to be sure I had translated the phrase properly in my head. He was fatherly and kind to me, even though we disagreed on almost everything. He came with me that Friday to the city and wrote me a sonnet outside an overpriced pizzeria by the colosseum.

I only stayed in Rome for a week, but the work-exchange saved me precious money. Then I went to Florence with no such arrangement, having to pay for a hostel and realizing that I was missing 100 euros. I had planned to survive in Europe on the small direct deposit I received every few weeks for researching and writing a Western philosophy textbook with a professor. But with the missing money, I had only twenty-five euros left, exactly enough for one night at the cheapest hostel in town. *One* night, and my professor wouldn't pay me for a few more days.

I was careless for misplacing my money, but now I was stranded. My parents rarely had twenty dollars in their bank account, so I didn't consider asking them for help. As a middle child of eight, I had long ago stopped asking for favors.

I walked all morning to the highest part of Florence, where I knocked on a convent door, hoping these were nuns who take a vow of hospitality. The blue-eyed abbess was exceedingly gracious at first.

"I lost my money in Rome," I explained, and her smile didn't budge as she said, "I believe you."

"I have twenty-five euros," I offered.

"Our rooms are fifty."

"Yes, I know, but I don't have fifty."



“Our rooms are fifty.”

“What do you pro—”

“I suppose you will have to sleep on the streets.” Her smile was unmoving.

“Oh, yes. I am so sorry to come here...” I grabbed my backpack and pushed my sunglasses to my face so she wouldn’t see the tears welling in my eyes. Humiliation followed me as I walked for hours away from the city, searching for a place to sleep. There was nowhere secluded, and I refused to sleep on the streets.

So I walked until I was too weary to keep walking and laid on this park bench to rest. It was not a good place for the night, but perhaps a nap of an hour or two. I felt the humidity seep into my body, sogging my brain like wet bread. *David, David, David.* His name echoed like a mantra, a rough translation of the presence I felt swelling around me. *David, David.* Without him, I am exiled as a stranger to the streets. Without him, I am laying on a muggy park bench in these ugly surroundings. Without him— I sat up, a resolution seizing me. I have learned my lesson, I thought. In my mind there was another bench where David and I had met, and it seemed to grow closer as I walked to the hostel.

*I can’t live without him, I can’t live without him,* my brain recited. This whole trip was childish! Did it mean anything but a flight from love? David was perfect for me—this could not be doubted. And yet I had doubted; I was wracked with doubt. “This will be a good opportunity,” I had told him, “to figure out what we want.”

But as I walked for hours—back to the city, back to the hostel where I handed the receptionist the last of my money—the blue of David’s eyes laughed through my very own lids like the subtle pulsation of sky. He was right, maybe, about love being a sensation which stays. There would be no more sleeping outside. I would find a way to get money for the next few nights in Italy. Then I would fly home.

The next morning, a small miracle. Paul messaged me on Facebook: “Found your money in the pillowcase. Will be coming to Florence today and I’ll bring it with me.” We spent the afternoon together and then I took a bus to Venice, leaving my sleeping bag draped over the balcony of the hostel. After a few days it would be picked up, I assumed, by someone who would actually use it.

I came to my senses in Venice. Did I think David would be back on that bench of our first beginning, waiting for me? I had left him. There could be no going home until I figured out why. After all, I had planned to come here before I’d even met David. He may right about me running, but it’s not from him.

In an alleyway by a Venetian canal, I began to write, revising my story with my decision to stay.

*I suppose we are all like that nun. Not brave enough to be good, we succumb to our own bureaucracy of being, doing what is acceptable simply because it is being done and has before been done.*

So I must be brave. I must go to the woods in Spain. Because—

*brave-less bureaucracy ties the soul in red-taped death.*

I was doing it again—pontificating. Writing true words, but in the improper place.

*Maybe Spain is about that. Recognizing falsity.*

But as I read the last line, I was suddenly angry, wanting to erase everything. Anything I write about this senseless performance art piece feels like a desecration.

The truth is that I am trying to dislodge a bullet from my body. Maybe there is a clue engraved on it, or maybe it is blank. Only the pain is real. Only the need.

I walked back to my Airbnb in Padua while clenching and unclenching a fist. Meanwhile, the blue of David's eyes seemed plastered all over the skies, lurking beneath peeling terracotta walls and glinting off glass surfaces.

For two days, I ate a jar of Nutella while I wandered the Venetian canals in a state of sugared giddiness and artificial energy.

On the third day I was paid, and crossed the street to a market to buy a thin package of spaghetti noodles, tomato sauce, and a jar of olives. I cooked in the kitchen of the Airbnb and went to the bedroom to eat (wood-floored, a few rays of sun on the floor), popping olives in my mouth between bites of sauce-drenched spaghetti.

*Someday, I thought—David's face rising always before me—Someday I will be good enough to love him.*

The next day I took a flight from Milan to Istanbul, where I stayed for six weeks with an elderly woman, for a small price. From Istanbul to Vidreres, where I taught English to the girls in the sun-flickering house near the beach.

And then Girona. Because the sky was still stalking me.



At dusk, I walk back to camp and sleep.

Try to, at least.

In the morning, I sleep more.

I go to a café and find the boy with the dog has messaged me, inviting me to dinner. My hair is still okay, though maybe not so appley.

I say yes.

Of course, I am thrilled. My writing seems sonnet-like and I barely think of David all day. Is it so easy to replace true love? *What is true, anyway?*

My guilt gets lost in philosophy and I wear lipstick, just in case.

