

I

The sunlight shone through the crack between the curtains and the wall. Her bed was inconveniently pushed up against the same wall as the window so that at about 7 o'clock in the morning, the light cut a harsh diagonal across her face and woke her up.

Her father owned an antique furniture store which, for her, meant two things: first being that she got wooden things for Christmas and birthdays rather than satin or chiffon like her schoolmates, and second being that furniture was constantly being moved in and out of their home, rooms being rearranged to accommodate for new acquisitions. She had come home a few days prior to a brand new, very old cheveret desk which her father had decided better sit where her bed had been.

Her shiny dark curls fell across her neck as she rolled to her side, away from the window. Eyes still closed but awake to it all, the sound of the birdsong outside the window reached her ears. She tore the blankets away and let the cold air raise the thin hairs of her stomach and back of her neck. Legs swung off to the side, now sitting, she opened her eyes to the flowers that sat across the room on the old desk.

Though they had arrived a few days ago, they had only just opened overnight. Ranunculus, he had remembered. They were her favorite—she had told him when they had arrived at the topic of names—such a jarring name for such a delicate flower. She always liked when something turned out to be very different from what its name suggested. There was a certain hope in the mystery of things not being as they seem, a hope that behind the thin veil of reality, there might be a whole world more marvelous and decadent and fanciful and worthwhile than the eyes or ears can consume. Life presents itself one way to the senses and another to the mind to those clever enough to pull the two apart from each other. She was a clever girl.

For this reason, prefixes, suffixes, root words all bored her stiff. She had no interest in learning the formulas that told you a word's meaning. Why, she had asked her English instructor, take something so romantic as language and turn it into another lesson in math. Copious. "Copia" meaning "plenty," plus "ous" meaning "full of" equals "full of plenty," copious. But where is the art in such equations? What about the way "copious" *sounds* rolling off the tongue. The way it stretches the mouth, first tall, then wide. The way it feels when the lips just briefly kiss to separate the pregnant vowels. The way it would look if you had to draw it, large, swooping brushstrokes, practically spilling off the page.

This particular protest earned her an assignment in addition to the chapters of *Wuthering Heights* already assigned to the class. She would now spend the weekend combing through her copy of the novel for mathematically derived words, breaking down one hundred of them into their Latin meanings.

It might have been worth it, to challenge institutional authority and the adult intellect like she had, if she didn't love *Wuthering Heights* so dearly. She found herself lost in it. Reading the pages of Lockwood's diary, she felt Nelly was telling a story at whose center she lived. She had read it more than ten times before it had ever been assigned in class. Her favorite novel would now be subjected to a scientific dissection and algebraic worksheet.

Her first time reading it, not yet halfway through the book, she was already upset that Emily Brontë had not written more. Of all the Brontë sisters, she felt the strongest connection to Emily. While her schoolmates raised their hand in class to elicit speaking time for marveling over Charlotte's take on romance, she chose to read almost anything else under her desk.

Would you like to join us, her instructor had once asked after she'd missed her name being called at least twice. No, she retorted in her usual tone of defiance, I need not contribute another

mind's attention to Charlotte Brontë's naïve romance, it has already driven your entire classroom of young women mad, lusting for a Rochester of their own. Such immature fantasizing, might I add, will not make you successful in your endeavors, ladies. I should know, she finished, under her breath.

She did know. A mere seventeen years old, she enjoyed the company of a man 15 years her senior and had since she was fourteen. It started the way most romances do (unless Charlotte Brontë is the author of the story, lighting the match of love on the phosphorous of emotional manipulation), he was a friend, first of her parents, then of them all. It was her mind that had captivated him. Although, she would say to herself, it did help that her thoughts lived in such architecture. It's always that way, isn't it? She discovered after the girls in school had begun to gossip about her affairs, sex really is everything to those who have never had it, and peripheral to those who have it so frequently.

She would coincidentally have plenty of time to ruin *Wuthering Heights* completing her punishment over the weekend as he was travelling to his sister's and it was her younger brother's turn to help out at their father's shop. She hadn't worked the previous weekend either but at her parents' permission. With the two of them constantly focused on their business, they felt guilty for never having taught her to drive. Their motive in having her learn was of course to put her to work making deliveries, but whatever their reasoning, it meant she would have a license. So the last weekend they had asked him to take her out driving.

The two of them went into the city for the purpose of learning to drive in heavier traffic, if her parents asked, but actually spent most of the afternoon listening to his record collection in his apartment, as they often did. It usually started with them going up to get something to drink, a cocktail for him, something virgin for her. Although most of her tastes were far beyond her age,

she had not yet adapted to the subtle burn alcohol left after sliding down her throat. He'd let her pick out a record, and then another, and then another, and they'd lose track of time, lying on the couch, his sturdy hand gently tracing the outline of her silhouette, her eyes closed, always closed, letting herself drift somewhere far away from the only city she'd ever known, carried by the music made in faraway places, until she arrived at the monuments where such art was inspired. There, she would worship, until his hands became firmer around her, shaking her to come back to him. Her parents would be expecting her soon. They had better go.

She wouldn't miss him while he was away that weekend. Their relationship wasn't that way, like so many juvenile couples who'd continue to reach for each other after letting each other's hands go, necks craned for one last glimpse before parting ways. She actually couldn't think of a time she had missed him. She lived so deep within the caverns of her own mind that her feelings did not rely upon the state of reality or the presence of a person. In this way, she had finished childhood. Children are shaken by reality and dependent upon the presence of people. Many years ago, she had shed this obsession with the physical world. Only then did she discover the expanse of her own mind, a truly powerful thing. Never again to be burdened by structures, definitions, or evidence, she lived in the reality of her choosing.

She crossed the room, her nightgown falling down over her thighs from where it had ridden up and caught on her hips, to smell the Ranunculus, not because they had a particularly fragrant scent, but because there was something romantic in inhaling a bouquet of flowers. It was a sort of way feel him, breathing it in, the same way people are always filling themselves with another without touching. The way they close their eyes listening music and see themselves swaying in the arms of another. The way they close their eyes wearing their shirt and see themselves lying on

their chest. People are all the time doing this—tricking their senses, the intangible becoming tangible, the shapeless sculpting reality.

The note he had written rested to the side. Inside it, he had written in short strokes, ‘Happiest of birthdays to you, my dear.’ Not a year from then, she would be eighteen, and with that would come the right to be taken seriously. She would no longer live this double life, forced back into the world of adolescence, petty gossip, school dances, groundings, and curfews. Sex would no longer be a secret, a thing of shame, but a natural expression of holistic femininity. He’d remind her, you’ll move out one day soon, and your parents won’t be coming home to watch over you like a child.

He loved her parents dearly. They were, after all, first close friends of his. He, even more so, deeply appreciated the trust they had bestowed in the two of them. And he loved her, did not see her as a child, but school nights and curfews could not help but remind him, regardless of her shape and her mind, of her age. So he, admittedly, did look forward to her graduation.

But for now, she would endure—the senseless regurgitations of unoriginal schoolmates, the tiresome rituals associated with the awkward emergent years of high school, the hierarchical structures determined by antiquity rather than intelligence—she had, after all, become quite skilled in the art of enduring.

II

The light coming through the window felt offensive; she had hoped that warm sunlight shining across her face in the morning would draw her from her sleep into the world in which she so often did not want to be. She brushed her stringy hair out of her face and pulled her blankets up over her head. Under the covers she found her body, thin and bony, her pelvis protruding where she hoped hips one day would be, her breasts, though tender, barely raising her nightgown above

the skin of her sternum. From the blankets, she reached for the clock, pulling it under with her. For a while, she stared at the hands, her eyes adjusting, visualizing how many times around the littlest one would have to go around before the day was over. Grimacing, she threw it out from under the blankets. It hit the desk, so she crawled out into the room to check for chips or dents, pulling her nightgown down to cover the bruises on her thighs. If she neither saw them nor allowed herself to feel them, were they really there?

The desk showed no signs of damage. She traced its delicate trim and inhaled its old, antiquated smell. It overwhelmed her, the age of this desk, and yet, look how it stood, sturdy as ever. She wished, in that moment, to also be made of wood.

Atop of it sat her dried flowers. She had begun drying them after her younger brother's funeral in an attempt to bring beauty from ashes. If something that died can continue being beautiful, such as a rose, then there must be beauty in all of life's worst offerings. Each flower—in a vase, pressed in a book, framed, all dead, but yet more beautiful in their delicateness in a way they had not been when alive—had been collected for a moments she so desperately longed to become beautiful. As there was no life void of some pain, she found there was no death void of some beauty.

She pressed her cheek to the wood. It felt warm against her chilled skin. She thought, it's the secrets it holds that keep it warm. She pressed her forehead down into it, offering it her secrets too.

One day she would find the words and pen them. She would give the words to her parents, or maybe a stranger. Which would be better? Perhaps the stranger. The stranger would never again have to watch her come down the stairs, pour a bowl of cereal, collect her things, and leave for school, as though everything was normal when, in fact, nothing was normal. She would never have

to meet the stranger's eyes after they had made eye contact with the bruises they would inevitably ask to see.

Yes, perhaps one day she would give her words to a stranger. One with small hands and kind eyes that she knew would never hurt her. And her secret would be theirs. It would sleep in their bed for once. It would give them dark circles beneath their tired eyes. They would lug it with them to the breakfast table and to the park, to the store and back home. They would lug it to the police and there, they would hear it echo off of the one-way mirror back at them. They would sit in court with a hand on the Word of the God whose Son's cross hung around the neck of the man who came into her without permission. This particular stranger would believe her, too. And they wouldn't suggest that it was her fault, like he had. Maybe the stranger would even have money to give to her so she could go far away. Yes, when she found such a stranger, she would tell them.

But for now, she would endure—the carefully timed visits during her parents' absence, their trust that he abused, the unwanted touches on a body still changing, the threats accompanied by pitying eyes and a demeaning caress, the whisper so low that only she could hear 'you'll move out one day soon, and your parents won't be coming home to watch over you like a child'—she had, after all, become quite skilled in the art of enduring.

III

They'll find her, adorned with dried flowers, beneath the desk to which she had given her secrets, head resting on the pillow of her favorite novel, arms folded across her girlish chest, clock whose littlest hand she had watched to the last moment resting beside her, and they will wonder *why*.

Truth be told, she had sat down to write, but she did not know which story to tell, no longer knew which was true, and she feared, each day, which awaited her.

Before she could find out, she laid herself to rest, her brother just waking from his slumber next door to her, her parents seated together on the sofa below a portrait of their innocent family which hung on the wall, her lover on his way to greet her with his benign caress.