

The Maws of Kites

I have fallen asleep in my clothes again, all my layers save for the sweater I wore last night. It is still suspended on the chair by my bed. It must be close to dawn. The house is quiet and I imagine the floors are still warm from the company last night. Some of them might still be here. I don't know.

I know what time it is. There's no clock, but I know what time it is, like when you don't need a watch to know the hour, but can tell from the faint blue in the windows. Then again, there are no windows in here, but I know what time it is.

I might as well get up now.

My phone says 5:47

Yes, I might as well get up now.

I normally wake up at this time. Mrs. Juneau, the old dowager I took care of, had me wake up with her at these hours. She would always wake up at this time, but she died a few months ago. I still seem to be in the habit of waking up before dawn like she's still asking me to and I still go to her house, take care of her things, but I don't have to get up at such hours to do so. But I will. I've grown used to the feeling of greeting the day before the sun has risen. I don't know why, it's not a happy or content feeling, but it's satisfying something else.

I might as well start out to her house now.

5:49

Yes, I might as well start out now.

I get up. The floors are warm as I thought they would be. I grab my shoes, one in one corner of the room and the other below my bedframe. I grab some underwear from the hamper. All my clothes are crumpled and these panties look no better. I've ruined so many pairs. I grab the rosary on my desk. Should I grab a book? I only have a few on my two jute string shelves. There's one above my bed and another one by my closet ten feet from the door. But not even. I suppose you could call this room a "hole," but there's nothing pleasant in that term. I call it the place beneath the stairs. That sounds nicer.

So I emerge. The scent of distilled beer reminds me of another morning where I've smelt our post-revels. It's a faint, persistent acidity like a strong soured yeast as though the Hamm's and Pabst were brewed in cheap vinegar. The chairs are arranged in a circle around a coffee table where there are still some bottles and cans. I walk over and shake a few. They are either entirely empty or full. How odd, there's usually a half drunk one here or there. One of windows is open. I can tell without looking because a faint breeze comes and I can feel it. It blows through the sash nailed to window frame and I watch a horizontal can on the carpet roll back and forth until the wind dies down. It doesn't make a sound.

There is comfort in this moment, this of many mornings before the wake of life and sound. Then there is no comfort at all.

I should start out now.

6:01

Yes, I will start out now.

Here comes someone. Jillian's partner, who appears to be wearing a floral muumuu, materializes from down the hall. She moves daintily as the looseness of the gown doesn't appear to be touching her, but hovering a few inches over her body, down to the fringes where her knee caps squinch and gesture.

I've always thought her kneecaps looked like faces. I smile at her, but I don't think she notices me. She goes to the kitchen, fills a glass of tap water and takes a gulp. She finishes it, fills the glass and downs it again though less intensely this time. I can hear her ingest the water, hear it disappearing somewhere below her thyroid with pockets of air to bloat its passage. Without watching her I know this. I listen and keep my eyes from looking at her.

I step outside. There's something odd about this hour. I thought of it many times, but I've failed to explain it to myself and others like Jillian and Mrs. Juneau. I've asked them "Have you felt it in the morning?" and they didn't know what I meant, "Have you? Have you?" and they didn't know what I meant. But I know those questions didn't really need an answer. At these hours I feel strange and tired and fret over nothing. My fingers, how they wish to move and move all spidery like they moved and moved in the night's rag. But now they are still because the dawn sedates me. It turns my thoughts inwards where there's only a faint sign of consciousness like a light blue showing above when you're at the bottom of a pool. You feel excavated by it and alone in the peace where there are no cars or people to thwart your thoughts. But it doesn't last long. Dawn moves quickly. So now I must be off.

As I walk I think of the dreams I might have had or not had. I can't remember. Before leaving Jillian's partner and I talked briefly, mostly of her asking questions like "Molly, what are you doing up?", "Molly, what time is it?", "6:03?", "Molly, where are you going?", "Mrs. Juneau's?", "Molly, what's that in your hands?" You only get inquires at these hours. I suppose she wasn't fully awake and that's all she could muster up, but those questions didn't really need an answer. I did respond, however, but I seem to have forgotten what I said. I'm starting to wonder if I told her about Mrs. Juneau or the rosary in my hands. She might ask me again later. Maybe then my answers will be more truthful. But I couldn't

possibly explain right then and then how Mrs. Juneau and I would do prayers every morning, how she can't do them now and how I still do them for her, succinct and precise as she once did. Her evangelism must be starting to rub off on me. I do these prayers for her every morning alone by her bedside, thinking *Yes, yes this is for her*, but I myself grow passionate in those verses while they feel half real and half haunting as I kneel, clutching and counting each bead. It is unruly. And then I wonder if fidelity is a curse.

There is no one around. From where I stand I can see Fuel a block away. I imagine the frequenters will be numerous today. I can picture it as the same people outside wincing at one another. Smoke will rise from their hot beverages and cigarettes, around their scrunched faces expressing some kind of anguish as though their skin must compress against the intolerable sun. But there is no one there now, no one at all save for a few people by the bus stop. There's a woman with a push cart and a man with his hood up, slinging a sack over his shoulders. Both are facing west. Two men from down the road are talking to each other and I can hear blips of their conversation. They cease once they reach the bus stop, standing quietly like the others as patients ready for the day's misdoings that makes them dwindle, peak and pine.

We are all so busy. But I suppose my case is different.

6:15

Yes, my case is different.

I have no designations, no obligations. I suspect those people don't have much of choice to stay in or go out. They must remit themselves to the day. But I don't do much with my time. I don't want to. Doing too many things make me feel undone. I suppose I like to bask in reclusion and sometimes wander and see the different environs and places where no one knows you even if it's just on the other

side of town. It is lovely and I feel that, after all these years (three to be exact) of making Mrs. Juneau's my home, anonymity is very much a part of it. The only ones who know me on her side of town are a few family members (her dead husband's brother and a distant cousin who used to borrow money). The neighbors don't know me though. Sometimes they appear midday, spending the afternoon on a deck chair while reading the newspaper or looking at their phone.

I've told Jillian and her partner about the area. I tell them Mrs. Juneau's is by the lakefront, adjacent to the other old houses that are not really houses, but chateaus hung on the edge of craggy slopes. And then they ask me to describe what it looks like. I tell them and then they know. I find that strange. Anybody can recognize those houses, but never the people inside. But I suppose Mrs. Juneau didn't want the exposure. I understand that now. She just wanted to be left alone.

Humboldt is empty. A few cars pass by, but there are no people. It must have rained last night. The wind blows and creates lines on the puddles. I can see the reflection of my foot before it touches the water. It appears darker than usual without the sun being near its zenith in the sky. The birds chirp at each other as though they are singing in unison but following at different time signatures. A bus goes by. I wonder if the people I saw waiting are in it, or perhaps they took a different one.

Here comes someone in jogging clothes.

"Good morning." He says.

I say the same thing.

Here's a house I know of. Jillian and I spent New Year's here in the lower half. I remember how we got there, but I don't remember how we got home. We knew the people there from school and some of their friends who filled the place. The floors were swept with our bare feet which rocked and kicked as we formed a circle around one man who was so skillful with his finger work on a Spanish

guitar, rapt with wild eyes and a voice which screamed and screamed. He wanted us to sing, but no one knew the words (let alone could anybody understand him). The floors were wet with sweat and discharge. The beer acted like a cognizance soap, scrubbing my dull senses clean. Everyone was in their underwear. I still had my coat on, but pretty soon I was stripped down too, linking my arms in other arms and going around the room as the eyes of men and women alike leered at my enameled body and questioned the stains on my panties. It felt like my secretion was practically dripping from them.

I haven't been back there since. I don't think the same people live there anymore. It's been some time since I've seen any of them, all except for one who I ran into at a film screening, but that was about a year ago. He said he was living with his parents now, but was planning to move into a new place with a couple of friends. He rarely sees the old tenants anymore. One of them completely disappeared, but that was alright since they weren't close. Now that I look at the place I think *There I was, half-naked with all those people who are now but walking shadows without names or faces to remember them by.* They have dwindled along with the dregs of that night's desires which seemed so important then. I never told Mrs. Juneau about it. I bet if I would have it wouldn't have done any harm. She was modest, but nothing seemed to bewilder her. I remember at one time I told her I lived with a girl name Jillian and then she asked if we were lovers. I told her Jillian already had one who was a bit older than me and then she asked if her partner was male or female and I did not digress. The truth made her more curious. "You might be surprised to hear this," she said "but I also once had a woman here who was very close to me."

"Oh really?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered "Amy, Amy Fitzpatrick."

We were sitting in the sunroom as we talked. She turned to one of the windows near her chair and looked out on the terrace that ran through the trees and down the slope. The sun showed in her eyes.

“She lived here long after Armory died, but we had known each other long before him and I were ever together.”

Her eyes seemed softer in the light and crestfallen under those aging lids that told me to read through the twoness of her words, so I took her out on the terrace and wrapped a quilt around her. We sat quietly, half-admiring the leafless trees. There was something in that scene, in the walls and parapets, the dry roots and vines which looked like brambles without roses. I looked to her, but I couldn't tell what she was thinking. She went on about what had grown in each spot, blue larkspur here, columbines there, all once overrunning their bounds, but well attended for. She asked if we could go to the edges of the terrace. We went down and I combed aside the thickets. I remember she told me she could feel the concrete moving under us. “Do you feel that?” She said.

I sat her down on a bench and went to grab her chair, but when I returned she was already standing at the parapet, leaning and shaking precariously close with all of her weight against her hands. I brought the chair behind her and she slumped down exhaling “I'm sorry,” between each breath “I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I just... I just... Wanted... To see.”

It seemed standing had shocked her system, but eventually she settled down. I asked her what she was trying to do, but all she could manage to do was point her finger over the sides. I took a look. There wasn't much to see in the fallen bows and barrenness of the slope, but then I saw it. Down where there were two mounds of dead wood was a headstone with what appeared to be a writhe of white

feathers on its face. I turned to her and she signaled me closer. As I knelt beside her she said “Her ashes.”

“My father used to say ‘You were the cause of the war.’” She said. It was late. We were in her bedroom and she was lying down. “And I used to tell him ‘Someday there will be no war.’ But it... with the changes... it never mattered. It didn’t matter because it always felt like the end. Not always, but mostly the end.”

I took a sip of coffee and nodded. I looked to the window. From our vantage point the street lamps glowed just beneath the pane that reflected the light and made the night seem darker. I didn’t say anything or cross opinions with what she said.

“I kept composure in these closed spaces. It was so silly. I never told him how I felt. Wanting to marry me, he’d say ‘Lulu, Lulu. Look at me Lulu. Lulu Juneau. Look into my eyes. Look. Look.’”

I placed my hand on hers. I could feel the thinness of her skin, how the skin felt like a loose glove over her bones. Her eyes lids were shut, but her eyes kept shifting under them.

“‘They’re your lover’s eyes. Your lover’s eyes’, and I said ‘Armory...’ and then, and then... ‘You’ve been smuggling with her. That bitch. Don’t you tell me –that bitch!’”

“Mrs. Juneau...” I murmured.

“‘You’ve been smuggling, haven’t you?’ Oh Molly, before, he’d just say ‘My little peacock, you envy her don’t you?’ because I’d look at her and he would laugh and say ‘You envy her,’ but he never understood. I’d look at her and he thought it was envy, but she and I knew someday he would know and when it happened... all he could say was ‘that bitch, that bitch!’ and then it was like he wanted me

to marry him again because then he said ‘Look, Lulu, look at me. Look,’” she turned and looked at me hard. ““They’re your father’s eyes.””

“Mrs. Juneau.” I murmured again. I brought her hand into mine. Her fingers curled and I could feel them tightening a bit.

“He killed himself and that was all. It was the end after that, always the end because I never got over it, I could only get used to it.”

She turned away. I sat for a while before I got up and turned out the lights. Her face still showed from the lights in the windows, glowing softly like a faint tableau while I looked at her from down the hall. I wanted to crawl into that bed next to her, but then I quit looking back.

I never went home that night. I barely ever go home anymore. Exempting of last night, I haven’t left Mrs. Juneau’s for some time. Even after she died I never left. Yesterday might have been the first time in months. However, though I hate to say it, there was a reason to leave. The house has altered into something which bears no sense of ownership. It is a hollow archive of slab and stone, insentient to those who wish to make it their home. No proprietors could exist for such a place, but only ones who would want to bury themselves in all its valuables and trinkets. I would lie at night and sense something in the walls, sense something drifting over me. I had to leave. Just for one night. But now... I’m closer now. I’ve reached North Avenue.

6:32.

Yes, I’ll be there soon.

The wind is stronger over here. The river gleams. In the distance, where a TV tower erects itself over miles of beech and elm trees, is where the water makes its first bend towards the bridge. It

appears still, but as it reaches closer its actual motion can be seen, climbing over the rocks and forming white crests that shoot out like collections of distempered froths.

There are scarcely any cars or people yet. I imagine some must be up, taking a coffee with morning delicacies. And look here! A paper mill that has already begun the day's labor! It conjures smoke like a cauldron that never ceases, what with it having to manufacture sheets of lined and unlined paper without consent because they need neither a yes or no to be produced. Lavishing.

There are still no cars or people yet. The day is beautiful, told by a poetic tongue, but its speaker slips on certain words as though they are full of solicitude, causing them to mispronounce 'beauty' and 'sunshine' and 'water'. Sometimes I can't say certain words correctly. Jillian has called me out on it, suggesting I might have a lisp. Mrs. Juneau has never mentioned it though and when I asked her about it she said it wasn't noticeable.

Jillian is just too conscientious of little things. She notices many things about me I have never thought to consider. I rarely think of her perceptiveness, but last night it seemed she was sensing something in the air of me. She said "You're hiding something, aren't you?" and I said "There's nothing to hide," but that had her sneering "Why don't you speak frankly? What's on your mind? Speak to me. Why don't you ever speak? Speak." But there was nothing I wished to tell her. She was too insistent and I was all but willing to confide because there was no reason to tell of death when a listener's ears are just as cold. She doesn't listen. I love her, but she doesn't listen. I could have told her partner. She listens at least, but then again she wouldn't have believed the absolute truth of my situation with Mrs. Juneau because it is grim. *I haven't put it together yet.* The crux of the matter has become a heap of broken images. They must be assembled, but now I wonder if they won't be solved until tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

Mrs. Juneau! What have you done? “Don’t bury me. No commotion. Leave me be. Let them find me.” I have carried your words. I have carried them and it is not you but I who has had to see them through. You are still living because you clutched on with meager requests I thought I could not borne. But I carried them, I carried them and you did not leave exactly, but remained and lingered in me. I heard your words as they came to me all last night, my mind made up of them like many hoarse voices I could not get rid of even in drunkenness, listing to their inflamed throats beckoning me. And now I am returning.

I remember the morning after you showed me Amy’s grave. I wanted to take a look and so I went around the sides of the terrace. The grey weeds and fallen creepers had me stumbling down the slope. The sun showed through a glade at the bottom. I read the inscription wreathed in white plumes “My Peacock/Amy V. Eliot/ 1918-2001.” I had never seen an isolated grave. To think there was only one below me. One death, one body that can weigh itself upon your mortality with a hefty stone, carried on your back like Atlas whose slouching is eternally downwards.

I carry her.

Yes, I carry her.

But you had me do it. You said *I would kneel by her grave not praying at first, but just kneeling because there was nothing to say, no soft words which would redeem me and after my bereavement had worn itself out during my silence and servitude to still loving her in death it then became a love of death where there was only repentance.* And then I knew, and then I knew you were answering more than Armory’s words “Oh you envy her, don’t you?” because they meant nothing to you. His words were simply the words of an idiot. No, the passages you had me read were for saying nothing so long ago. You could finally pay your penitence through me, not from will or choice,

but from your desperate indecisions as to whether you should make amends to the dead. And then what became of you? You drew a veil over the bleak truth that there might be nothing after death. It bore holes in you and although you felt them you didn't know what they bore. Like so many of us, you stopped up the holes with blessings and then there was no passage to let through for the living to tell you otherwise. I couldn't say a word as I saw you laying in your bed with two eyes and a shelf of forehead to shade them with. Laying like you were floating, it must have felt like a crown of flowers –nettles, daisies and long purples– was around you, so serene and ready to sink into the bed. The holes were stopped up. You had no fears, no doubts of unkind words which the living pontificate against the dying one's uncertainty. That thing you most feared, suddenly not real. The insulated woman could not die. And I understand that now, but I am undone because of it.

I have almost reached the turning point. Another runner passed me as I crossed Oakland. He might have said "hello" like the last one. I don't remember. There is a man outside of Von Trier dumping liquid into the road. He doesn't notice I'm watching him. The sidewalk is fenced off on my left side. They've been constructing a new library for a while now. The foundation and steel girders have been placed into the hole. I never see the workers, but each time I pass by it seems they're always on a new stage of production. I've counted how many cars I've seen in motion. Five so far. I normally see ten. Five cars left.

6:47

I'm almost there.

Here, she says come to the place that's home, somewhere that's full of comfort and solace. It will soften you and keep you from wondering where there is elsewhere to go. Here,

come and see, the desolation I have made of our home. Think of my rotting corpse. Has made me into a fiend? Poor Molly, I worry about you, poor dear, have I done you no good? Are you distressed? Look at us expand. A woman twain. One dead and one living, standing at two ends. Many happenings do nothing between us. They are there. Miniscule. But do nothing, yes, and yet here you are. Come to me.

I can see the lake now. Before I started sleeping at Mrs. Juneau's I would trudge up this hill everyday just to see the water. Its great bounty multiplies the sunlight on each whitecap, sparkling ardently like someone has tried to throw a fistful of glitter over the horizon. I have reached the turning point.

Here are the homes of unknown inhibitors. And here are the mansions that the Pabst children used to live in. Some of them have been converted into apartment complexes, one an art museum with a wrought iron fence to divide the sidewalk from its garden. I can see a marble statue through an arcade on the other side between the blocky shrubs and hedges. There is a park at the end of the street where the road bends back into Prospect and then onto Farwell. Where the road turns is Mrs. Juneau's brick paved driveway. I can see it now.

Nothing's been touched. Good, the house is still at peace. It still smells of dust and disuse. I walk down the hall into the living room where the furniture is covered with white sheets. There is dust on them too. From afar the dust looks like shadows, but not as smooth as though the layers are uneven and dearth. To think what moister could do to such thirsty fabric. Her chair and the divan are the only two pieces uncovered.

In the next room there are bookcases and a hi-fi wedged into one of the alcoves. I flip on the light switch behind one of the cases. I can see myself doing everything from several directions. There are mirrors in every room, the largest one being upstairs which faces an entire wall behind a curtain. Almost all of the rooms have arched ceilings, some with cornices and lintel pieces which curve and twist in fashion. If I could count how many faces are staring at me from the portraits and oil paintings, statues and angel faces, they would almost match up to the amount of goose bumps on my skin. They look at me and the rosary in my hands.

7:14

It's almost time to do the rosary.

I head upstairs towards Mrs. Juneau's room. It's starting to smell again. The Liqui-Zone isn't doing it any good. You can't smell it from outside yet, but I'm starting to wonder how long it will be before the neighbors notice it. I can see my reflection as I move down the hall. Everything –the decor, candles and photographs– copy themselves a thousand times in the mirrors and the hallway's narrow stretch appears to repeat itself endlessly. Here's the door. The smell is all I can think of. It is so unbearable I can't help but to choke on it. But I can withstand it. I open the door and see her lying there. Nothing has been touched. Good, she is still at peace.

“Good morning Mrs. Juneau.” I say.

Her face is blank and dry.

I stare at her from the door for a while. I walk up beside her and place the rosary upon the sheets where her chest should be. I leave the room and go to the linen closet to retrieve a towel for a shower.

The palpitation of my heart is always the first thing I notice when I lie down in here. The water falls, drenches my thin figure and dallies on my stomach that appears to concave below my chest. I watch the steam rise over the half-drawn curtain. Sprinkles of water jut out now and then from the base of the shower head, like it's a reminder of how old the pipelines must be, ready to fall apart and burst from the walls with all their greasy sludge and black colored congealments. Closing my eyes, I run my fingers through my thick pubic hair and then on to my legs where the water runs most smoothly through a winter's worth of hair, no longer prickly, but grown to a pleasurable texture. Organic and lovely is what it brings to mind.

I am about to fall asleep. It's nice in here. It reminds me of how my parent's shower used to be when I was little. I would lie in there all the time while the water ran and the bathroom steamed up. I would fall asleep in there too. It's nice to feel at home. At home, the water carries me and then I sleep like I'm dead, it seems.