

Clean

I was, or am, born in a box. I know no difference between is or was or will be. I have never been offered a promise, or a drink, or a hand. I have never touched another human for all my recollections. I do not know what I look like. You may wonder how I have an awareness of life, or anything, relative to my box. I have even been told it is not mine. I have been taught, by a number of androgynous teachers, so as to bar me from the hardships of gender: *It's all too hard*. These adjectives confuse me; because, what is hard is what is good, what is easy is what feels disappointing, and what is enthralling is what is "off-limits". Everything is off-limits. To use the word limits suggests I've known something large enough to be limited. I haven't, and my fingers misbehave when they twitch to brush flesh, to squeeze air and sand and point to *a direction*.

"Judges, can't I leave this place?" I ask the tribe seated behind the harshly non-reflective partition.

They are used to the question. They don't even stand up. Their eyes flicker no motion. My ears have become able to pick up the words that come from behind this partition, thanks to some finely-tuned adrenaline. There are mutterings of *dangerous, they've got no experience*, and *no, no, experience, experience*. That goddamn E word. It's what keeps me in here. I am an *experiment* and I am *empty*.

From the age of beginning, my teachers have been teaching me about history, technology and medicine. They try to keep me away from fiction; it is the F word of evil. No literature, no artworks (I am confined to realism, and only the dreariest of those), no music. I've never heard music! I've only heard *about* it. When I was twelve, I asked my teacher if any of this was real. I had no intimation that there was a world outside of this one, overwhelming but cradling this small colorless box where I stay. They desperately wanted to keep me away from religion above all things; but it's hard to learn about history or art without religion. It seems to be the driving force behind all things besides this experiment. I think it most cruel that I have been deprived of a God. They think it fiction, I know, but "fiction" to them is anything they can't see. Anything that can't fit into their teeny, monstrous little brains on failure steroids. They look, and they peer - oh, God, (see? His name means nothing) do they peer - through their dense, horny glasses, but they do not *see*. They cannot see me and it is infuriating.

There is a system of nets running about two feet above the cold cement floors, walls, and ceiling of my grand box hotel. It keeps me from ever touching the grave surfaces completely. It frustrates me that I cannot get to the essence of this room. The nets are too buoyant, they are not real. They are not solid, and they lack the truth that the walls do. But as I've been told, real life is comprised of false security and snares of obligation, and no one ever reaches the core of that, either. I bet it's warmer than cinderblock walls, and more fun to approach and grasp. I am always entangling myself in the holes of the nets and being pulled back down. Sometimes I climb up the side and hang on the ceiling just to free my clumsy feet, but I am quickly told to get down from there. They wouldn't want me falling to my "death". They're exaggerating. I probably wouldn't even die. But would it even count as anything more than a casualty of science? Of boredom? Of half-expelled, quickly exhausted curiosity?

My average days consist of sensory development, gradual exposure to language and knowledge. But I am told the events of the "real" world as if they are a story. History is a diverse story written by many, and what happens in those neat, odious newspapers is a confused piece of observation on musings and events that may not have happened. When I turned fifteen I realized that my enclosure is just that: a fenced-in, modified mimicry of all these things that have gone on *outside*. I first learned the word at ten and I first understood it at fifteen. It was the most exasperating and exciting discovery I'd made. There was more. It is an

essential human pleasure to finding more, an essential desire to wanting more, and I'd never been allowed either one.

My discovering the concept of the "real" world was the greatest triumph to ever breathe in this tiny cell. My Judges may think it is me, but I am no triumph. I am a lone breed. Alone I breed. My only offspring is vapid wonder, dead-end curiosity soaked in the great question. I go through this circular reasoning every day: Can I leave? *No*. But what is out there? *Nothing you will understand*. It's not my fault I've been trapped here my whole life. *Leaving would be disappointing*. How could anything be disappointing when I start here? This is no beginning. My default emotion is disappointment. Trying to feel anything else is like trying to cook with only a pot full of steam. Groping for substance. I thirst for emotion while I gulp bottles of vapor.

I found out that there must be a world outside of this when I got my disgustingly sterile hands on a copy of *Slaughterhouse Five*. Bless that book, the only piece of fiction I was able to sneak. If Tralfamadore can exist, why would I think these walls were solitary? Ignorance does not cancel out existence, and this is the thing my judges have been striving to squeeze into my brain all my life. If every moment of my life already exists, there better be some of them outside of this room; and *that* is what got me. If time isn't linear and I'm twirling around this "life" like a snipped astronaut in a galaxy or a crazed hamster in a ball, I had better bounce off of more than these four netted walls. If I could know where the rest of my life would be spent, I wouldn't want to be told. I would fear it would be in this box, and my necklace would be finished. So I promise myself I will leave, as this life is *mine* and I have never said that aloud before and I will *cut* the cord. The rest of it will not be spent talking about what is to be done next.

I mimic strangling myself in the nights. I try to force an amputation by blinding circulation in my leg with the netstrings. I bang my head against the thick separative glass. I writhe and at last try speaking as clearly as I can, "I will not be deprived."

I think they had more curiosity than pity, because they did let me out.
"Don't come back. Don't blame us."
I know they think I will die.

"It's heartbreaking out there. You've never seen the sun. You've never seen a storm. You've never touched another's flesh or seen your own face. Be careful who you talk to."

"You have no experience. Maybe this was a terrible idea." And one of my judges starts to cry.

"It's not how you think it is. It's nowhere near as bright. It'll let you down. Expectation; that's the other dastardly E word. *It's all a tease*."

I run out of the open door quickly because I've never seen them convey emotions before. I know, it's ridiculous. How do you teach a person how to be a person without including emotion? I don't think they were trying to make me into a person at all.

And I leave. I scream inhalations as soon as I step outside. I cannot suck this air in deeply enough - it tastes sweet! I fling myself from my feet to the grass over and over, realizing how fragile of a body I have and it thrills me. I feel like I've just peeled off layers and layers of skin and raw air is tantalizing the layers that have never felt it before.

I breathe some dirt right into my virgin lungs, and I know I must find a church. I hardly know anything about this world but I know it's the first place I should enter. I'm fascinated to see where I've been all this time. I turn around to see a slightly raised hovel, with only the steps (the steps I climbed so long ago!) visible. They lead to my box. For all my imagining, I never imagined there'd be a road right outside. There is! It's a neat road, too. It's not blurred with the dirt and its center lines are *clean*. I place one knee on each and notice what minimal space is between them. I roll my kneecaps across the pavement and mark long lines of gravel down my forearms and thighs. Who knew skin was so easily marked? Everyone but me, I suppose. All I know about human life comes from an eccentric novel and my sober

judges, but I hope it is tender. I think it is time to stop envying the people outside of my box and start pitying them for their tired eyes. I'm nearly translucent and the gravel skids look like I've pulled out some of my veins and laid them on the surface of my arms.

And then I get up and run with all the reserved energy of a creature with overdue freedom. I do not turn to watch my catacomb womb standing immobile behind me, fixed as it will be forever. But not me! I will never again be so still! There's too much I need to reach before sunrise, and even more I must reach before the next. I can't move fast enough. I approach the city - my box was only a mile or two outside of it, in the direction of nothingness, in the direction of "safety". *I approach the city.* What a righteous thing I am finally able to say! I never thought I'd approach anything except dull oblivion, but the one I approach now shines above the dark. I feel remarkably *human* for the first time. I've never needed to know how to express joy. I wonder if my stoic baby face ever bothered my judges; I wonder how badly, if at all, it *got* them.

I need to talk to someone. I worry for the imbalance of my soul. What if I fall in love with the first person I speak to? What if they're frightening to me? I keep running with my coltish legs. I don't know what a church looks like. I've seen one picture in a history textbook, but that was of the inside. Maybe I'll just feel it. My prickling nerves are gracious compared to the massive net of apathy I had been swaddled in. I worry because I think (and acknowledge that everything I *think* about life may be wrong) young life usually relies upon some kind of foundation. Rootless people tend to hover in the unforgiving pavement of cities. Everything seems to *burst* out of nowhere, like a convex kaleidoscope, the clean sit of the buildings on the grubby ground, the sharp lines that separate sky and metal and gravel. As if it were all an apparition that could spontaneously fold unto itself.

I press my palms to an illuminated, whitewashed board that reads:

Grace Church of the City
THIS DARK WORLD NEEDS THE RISEN SON

I get it. Like the risen *sun*. There will be light. Apparently it was sometimes dark outside of the box, too. What a comfort. I turn and walk up the steps. I've only ever walked up one set of steps before, my steps to escape, and the width captivates all of my attention. I'm very proud of myself when I make it to the top; I suppose churches always sit above steps. To assert themselves. Gently, of course. It's like the steps give you time to remember why you came here, to make you ascertain how many levels you are willing to climb to peek at salvation. The church is a lot scarier than I thought on the inside. Everything is gold, like the paintings of icons I'd seen in history books. I didn't think churches upheld icons. They always looked to me, the most naive of viewers, to be representative of nothing but disguised in overcompensating gild. I had a lot of time to overanalyze, so I tried to give human life and plot to every visual I was given. I had a skewed perspective because I made them all sinners in my mind. I couldn't have sinned yet, right? It would be too harsh to cloak me as a sinner before I've been given a chance to begin. How can you make a newborn feel welcome in this world? I ask a priest if they know if I've sinned, and they say we've all sinned. *I'm different though. I've never been outside.* You don't have to be outside to sin. There are plenty of sinful thoughts embroidered onto the human spirit, like the cracks in mugs that hold all the bad stuff, all your germs from years of coffee. Sometimes awareness is sin: knowing the evil that dwells in the cracks of your soul and the cracks of these sidewalks and not doing anything about them. The priest baptizes me by lowering my face and hair into a marbled tub of water and telling me not to be afraid. Of course I am afraid. They grip my neck and pull me out, gently though, and connect my forehead, chest, and two shoulders in a signal they call *the sign of the cross*. I will continue to make it for good luck.

My conversation with the priest *ignited* something in me, and I can't wait to meet other people; I want to find out if they sound the same, or different. How can every person sound different? But coming closer to the city I hear that they do, and it is *harmonious*. I have examined diagrams of discord and harmony and now I can hear it. It hurts but I don't want to cover my ears. It's so much warmer out here than inside my box, but other people are bundled in extra fabrics, and they look so sad. There's people everywhere and they're friendly, and they're giving out soup and socks and underwear but I don't need any of those things. I take the soup.

I realize as I taste it that it is so *easy* to live. It's painful and it constricts, but you can let your senses decipher the truth for you: just let yourself taste and see and hear and signal to your body where to go next. I was so *conscious* in my box, with no distractions. I wonder if I'll feel less guilty this way. Whose fault is it then, like this?

I want to talk to people but I don't know how. How do people start conversations? A person starts one with me first, asking me how to get somewhere. I widen my eyes until they walk away. People seem so solitary out here. I hate myself for judging them already. Maybe my judges were right. I don't know. For all of human vice, I can feel an underlying love. The imprints of the hard ground and its metal grates on my bare feet still feel warm.

People gather in the dark and I know to stay away from them. There are people selling fruits and bright-colored foods in little wooden boxes but they don't want to talk, they just want to sell. I wonder how people like me are supposed to live. I wonder what *people like me* means and how many people have that attitude. Isn't that toxic? Isn't that division? Aren't there just people, like us? But I am again surprised by how lonely people look. There's people *everywhere*. Why don't they touch and talk? They do, but not as much as they should. I never thought it would be like this, people on separate tracks. But, I have only been here for minutes.

I look at the side of a building that shines and I realize that it reflects all the people walking alongside it; I can see my face! Do I know who I am, now? My face is almost clear, with enormous, sunken dark eyes surrounded by perfectly smooth skin. Not like the chapped, flaming faces of these people walking by. I don't know what to do with myself now that I know. I can hold myself. I can warm my arms and feel like a *self*, an owner.

I want someone to touch my back like I always imagined people would do. Innocently place a hand on my back, to let me know they were there and we were together. I want to touch them, to let them know I'm here, but I'm scared. There are lights *everywhere* and I am not used to it. I squint, but I don't want to. They're so beautiful. They change colors and people aren't even looking at them anymore. I wonder how long it will take for me to stop staring, stop looking. I bump into someone. They grunt and I ask, "Where can I find experience?" They sigh and look confused and take my hand. I visibly shiver with gratitude. They walk me down the streets, into an underground tunnel with long, ugly trains opening and closing everywhere and people running in and out. They explain that every train will take you in a different direction, and I want to stay here until I pick the right one. I'm surprised at how cautious I am. I've never been faced with a decision. They take me with them, however, onto their train "home", they say. Everyone looks so tired - the air feels vacuumed - and people get up and talk and no one listens to them. People are selling candy and dancing and I keep flinching, blinking. This all feels like a performance.

The stranger brings me back to a building, filled with little rooms full of little people. They say I can stay there for the night, and I don't know when morning will come so I am happy. I don't want to stay here forever, of course. Why does anyone choose to live in boxes? It would be perfect to live in raw exposure with the Earth. Rooms are hideous. It's like humans

have reproduced the Earth to the best of their shoddy capabilities, to make it *safe*, to occupy themselves. How could it ever be as good as the massive garden of Earth? With its sticky white cardboard buildings, steely gray iron lacings covering the sky, pricking its silkiness. The soft, hot underground covered with tarmac and dark. We don't thrive in the dark. I can see that as I watch all of the reflections in this building full of holes.

This stranger lets me sleep on their floor and they sleep next to me, both of us on a soft, flat makeshift mattress that lies close enough to the ground so I can drag my fingers across the hard floor, back and forth in soothing. I am not used to comfort. This stranger clearly seeks comfort - perhaps that is the purpose of *experience* - and I sit up in the middle of the dark to stare out the long window. It's cold to touch but it's warm in here, and it shows the whole city below, like I'm sitting right on top. I realize that this is the biggest sight I've ever seen. I put my hand against the glass and watch it leave highlights that shiver with confusion from cold and hot and then disappear. I feel like a painter who's finally been freed of handcuffs.

While I stare I can see that everything is made up out of little boxes like mine. This person (are they a stranger anymore? When do people quit being "strange"?) has piles of cardboard boxes in the corners, and I wonder if this means they have a lot of experience. I watch the sunrise and I finally understand what is meant by "daybreak", when morning comes. I ask them about experience in the morning, and they ask me where I came from, so I tell. And they don't look surprised, they just start to teach me things. How to make food in their stove, how to dance; all of the things I wasn't taught. How to animate myself. I ask them about experience and what it means, and they tell me it means remembering all of the time that you got to leave your home, meet people, and get hurt. Apparently the getting hurt part is inevitable, and some people seek it harder than others; it sounds bit like a game, because the ones who hurt can only hurt once they've been hurt, and I ask them where the power comes from. They teach me how to make coffee and I keep drinking it, and we talk about power and control and submission. These are city terms; the slough of life on a large scale. They tell me I can always leave again, to seek a quieter, more beautiful place, but I can't imagine a place more beautiful than this.

I say I should leave because it makes sense that I would live with another person but it also doesn't. I need to make my own box. Maybe that was the problem all along. They tell me I should come back at night, when it's safe, and they write the address on my hand so I can follow street signs and come back. They tell me their name and I shiver because I've never heard a *name* before. I don't even have one. Their name is *Aran*, written on my hand like that in case I need to remember them. I'm sure I will because they are the first real person I've met. They give me another sweater to wear and I leave but I think I will come back. Aran takes my hands before I leave, and I feel comfort.

Two streets away from Aran's building I find crowds of people, young people, with faces as uncreased as mine so they trust me. And I trust them. They all have wild hair on their heads and face, and are buried under coats that hide their bodies. I smile at them and they look surprised but they invite me to join. They are all making their gathering look so secret, and I wonder if they're not supposed to be here. I don't see how anyone could be unwelcome in the city. I listen to them for a long time so I don't have to tell them who I am, because there really isn't an answer to that question. People are made of experience. I came to the city expecting it to mold me like a glacier, and I suppose it will. It spreads over me, thin and frigid like ice. And there's no going back.

One of the young people does ask me what my name is, and I write it on their hand like Aran showed me; *Sage*, because I know the sages have wisdom and experience and one day that will make sense. They smile and write *Lola* back on mine, and now I have two names on

my hand. I would like to write every name of every person I've ever met on my hands, like this. Lola traces their cold hands over the ink and I feel a love for them, immediately, because Lola also looks like they are fighting against their nature. I say I was created in a box I didn't belong in, and everyone cheers. They teach me about the word *solidarity*. How you can be with people without ever meeting them. I can stop talking for a bit because I can tell they want to keep me, now, but in a safe way. Not like my judges.

And they teach me how to build a fire in a garbage can when night comes, and to hide when certain people walk by, and to come out when other certain people walk by. And they teach me how to smoke to stay warm, and clap my hands and sing. And yell at certain people when they walk by, too. I usually stay quiet, though. They all love to run their fingers along my arms and temples, because my skin is so clear and pale, like water, they say. I look transparent. They teach me how to blush, and their faces are all different shades, like they got smacked all over. They tell me about their scars, which are synonymous with experience. Lola has one between their legs, that they won't show for shame. They say that's experience: people teaching you how to be ashamed.

They all wake up before the sunrise because it is still beautiful to them, and they criticize people who get tired of the sunrise. They enjoy criticizing. The tallest in the group, Silver (because they have silver hair), puts out their hat and lets their dark, burnt, angry ears back out into the damaging cold so people can leave money in it. I ask if this is allowed and Silver laughs. If everyone did what was allowed, nothing would work. All the boxes of experience that go on top of each other would be the same size, and I don't see what's wrong with that but I think about it. People leave us money when we dance because they like to see other people act foolish.

Sometimes in the mornings we take out instruments and play the most beautiful music, better than I imagined. That really makes people put money in Silver's hat, and they smile at me sometimes. I wait for them. Playing the tambourine in the temporary skies with all of these *people* who call me family, I understand why we were built to last a hundred years. That night, Silver asks me to tell my story in exchange for all of theirs. I want to hear it all so I talk and this is how it works; this is what people talk about on trains. I'm surprised that they have so many questions about the nothingness that was my life, but I answer and beg them to take their turns. Joel talks about their children, who were taken away because they could not afford to give them what they needed. People are apparently watching, always, to make sure you're following the rules, and doing what you should. People get angry though because they think they should do different things. Joel is sad about their babies though, they name them for us and describes their beautiful hair. I wonder where I came from, before the box. If all people come from people, where did I come from? They say it's possible that my judges created me. Very few people are created like this, because it would be dangerous if they were. It apparently forgets a lot of *feelings*, but they don't make feelings sound necessary. It just forced them to turn around and occupy places they didn't choose, and didn't want. They teach me how to feel anger, not just for myself, but for other people. I think that's important. I didn't know it was possible to feel things for other people; not to feel an emotion *toward* them, but to actually feel something as if they were you. Apparently I had this ability all along. They show me all of these powers of humanity I didn't know I had.

Late at night, people with loud cars stop in front of us and everyone stirs, jumping up from our nighttime pile of warmth. I feel fear for them but I don't know why. I'm developing an intuition, however slow. These people speak rudely to Lola, telling us that we can't be here, that we're "squatters" and "bothers". Lola starts to sing and scream at them and Joel tells them that we'll leave but then everyone yells because we don't want to leave. I don't think we want to

stay because this is our home - even though it is the only one I've had - I think we are just trying to be seen, to be immovable. I understand that.

But the people multiply from the backs of their loud cars, sirens blaring, and they start to yell and hit Lola with clubs and Joel tries to stop them but they throw us away like they can't see us. They aren't even looking at Lola while they hurt them. I start to cry, something I've never done before, and my excitement at this makes me cry harder. I get on my knees and hold onto their clubs and beg for them to stop hitting Lola. Everyone breathes heavily and they stop.

They look at Lola for the first time and I see something on their faces, something like when I first saw my reflection. And they pick her up and put her in their car, and they make me go with them. They hold my hand and as we drive away Silver kicks their cars and screams, the strangest language I've heard, at them. I cry on Lola's quiet head and think *why us?*

But then I know that I have finally been granted experience - as a gift, a thief, a transplant - that *E* word that is so close and so far from ecstasy.