

Sweeter Innocence

The people who still remember might tell you to guard the cradles. They might tell you to kiss your ring finger once before leaving an ancient place, to always ask it -- politely, dear heart -- before you take a rock, a feather, because anything discarded is still real, dearest.

But they will always tell you to stay away from the fae. They will tell you that the fae will snatch the air out of your lungs, corrode the iron in your blood, and steal you away without warning into their home, far away from the heady sun.

That is untrue. The fae only take the ones who want to be taken.

You are sixteen the first time you are incorrect, inverted, wrong. Summertime closes up the air, makes it thick with humidity and idealism and your feet are dangling near the edge of a thin stream. The mosquitoes thrive here. Your legs are raw with bites, a constellation of bloody *billets-doux* and your left leg bumps delicately, searingly, against another girl's right.

The girl, whose limbs look like starlight to you, cups a crumpled crimson flower in each diaphanous hand and whispers, *Rainflowers, dearest*. She presses them into your hands. You feel a wordless sin rise up in your throat when her flesh touches yours and then she kisses you and that sin has a name and it is *her*.

When you open your eyes again she is gone and the sky is rumbling darkly; the weeping heavens seem to say, *I know who you are now*. You lift your head to the sky and let your body become a single trembling reverent burning line and the rain washes clean away the ache.

You don't see her again. (Of course, you tell yourself, even if you did see her again, nothing would happen. Nothing that isn't allowed.)

In the two rainy, mosquito-sick summers that pass you start to think that you dreamed her, that in the shimmering heat you miraged her into burning reality, because your vocal cords coagulate when you go to confess on every single one of the one hundred and twelve Sundays that pass.

On the one hundred and thirteenth Sunday, you sit by the stream again. The water has long since dried up, leaving a hollow earthen path. (To the ocean? To the sewers? Your footsteps are too heavy for its shallowness.)

In the center of the worn riverpath is the girl that you loved years ago when the river still lived. She looks back at you apologetically, and her body looks like pressed stardust in the dim canopied light, and you catch yourself wondering what it would feel like to hold her again. (*She is so beautiful*, you think. *How could I have forgotten that?*)

“It’s about time,” You hear yourself say, and her face looks even more melancholy at that.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and closes her eyes. “I had to go back.” The shadows behind her shift, leaving intricate stained glass slivers of light. Light blooms into wings behind her.

The crown of your head aches at its brilliance. Her mouth tugs up at one corner, dimpling. “I could take you with me, dearest. It’s better there. More beautiful. More suited for someone as lovely as you.”

You let your hand rise to touch her cheek and it’s fragile, everything about this is porcelain. She leans her face into your hand and sighs, and her skin is cold; you feel it bleeding into your capillaries like a vaccine.

“You could stay here,” you whisper. “Stay with me for a while.” She nods against your palm and it almost feels like coming home.

She says she'll stay until the springtime, and you fall in love with her piece by aching piece by the beginning of fall, and when you kiss her you remember the myth about human beings existing as one torn into two and your halfness disappears, evaporates.

(One late night, your legs tangled together, she mumbles, "You're real. We're real again." You think you know what she means.)

Eight and a half months later, you wake to the sound of birds chirping and the steady hymnal hum of bumblebees and a dread so strong it tastes like nickel in the back of your mouth. You wake alone.

And then one day you're twenty years old, and there's still an aftertaste of wrongness on everything you touch and you're *trying* to make your life the shape of everything you need but it doesn't work like that. Not anymore.

When she comes back to you, you're at the ocean docks and the salted air tastes bitter and familiar on the tip of your tongue. She looks older, more tired in and around the eyes, but she still says she loves you with the same quiet reverence as she did two years ago.

When she comes back to you, it feels the way pulling out a rotten tooth does: agony followed by relief. You want to be angry, want to scream at her until your voice shreds into pulpy unformed flesh, but instead you kiss her. In the space between your lips and her lips you whisper, "Take me back with you."

She smiles a familiar dimpled smile. "Alright, darling." Waves crash behind the two of you, deafeningly unafraid. It's beautiful, almost.

The woods house the fae, where she brands sunlight into your veins, oxygen and hydrogen into your soul. When you roll your shoulder blades, photons shift into delicate shapes.

Afterwards, she is exhausted, (after all, breath taking is a violent act) but she murmurs into your ear, “There is nothing wrong about you. Not here. You get to be real, dearest.”

You kiss her then, and it’s clean. No more sins, no more shame, no more fear. The decomposition of the infinitesimal parts of you, the *petit mort* you thought was essential dissolves.

And inside you find a person.