

## *Letters to the Past*

A month and half has passed since we exchanged our last kisses. Friends expect me to be over it now. They don't talk about you anymore, and your name has become a taboo.

At times, it drips from my lips, with a certain uncertainty as to whether I should say it out loud.

And yet, I loved to utter that name so dearly. You were my present, ideally my future, and instead you became a thing of the past.

Another one on the pile of things I'd rather forget.

How are you? What's the shape of your life now? Does it still have my eyes in it? My sweet words and the late-night caresses on your drowsy cheeks? Mine has a you-shaped hollow in it. I'm trying to fill it with places, people, things that are not you. You know, I still look for you in other people. And when I see you in them, I run away. As fast as I can. You left a scar I can't seem to heal. Maybe it's still too early, but my friends expect it to not ache anymore. *I* expect it to not ache anymore. Yet, it still bleeds all the same.

Does yours bleed as well? Do you even feel it ripping your body to shreds? Mine does.

Perhaps you never got it. Perhaps my silhouette has been replaced by one-night strangers countless times already. Perhaps the thought of me never crosses your mind. I gave away all my tenderness to you, you gave me ache. Now ache is all that's left. I asked myself countless times 'how could you?', now all that's left is 'why did you?', with a long sigh of resignation hiding under my breath. And yet, anger still lingers over these damn questions. 'I should stop, I'll never get any answer anyway.'

That's what I tell myself, countless times.

And then night comes, and I'm engulfed in the darkness of my room; that's when I see you

sleeping beside me, with your hands lying between the sheets and your soft cheeks. What a vision! Then the memories resurface, and I can't help but feel disgusted.

Can't seem to shake these feelings off. They come and go, like passers-by mindlessly walking around with no destination in mind. I let them walk and stumble upon moments that flash before my eyes.

Is this what letting go is made of? Lips you won't touch anymore, hands you'll never hold again?

Hollows and dream-like memories you can't quite place?

Ache and taboos?

Anger and resignation?

Silence and words written in blood?

Perhaps I was born with the utter inability to let go and the desperate tendency to never let wounds completely heal, always scratching the crust until it bleeds again.

#

Hey

...

Hey

How are you doing?

All good

Glad to know. It's been quite a while, hasn't it?

Yeah, I was surprised you texted me, I thought you did not want to talk with me ever again

Yeah, I don't know, I wanted to ask you if you'd like to go for a coffee one of these days. Maybe you'd prefer a drink, though.

I see, yeah okay, let's do a drink at the usual place

The usual? Which one of the many?

The one near the konbini

Works, how about tomorrow at 10pm? Or do you still work at that place on the weekends?

Yeah tomorrow's good, see you

Yeah, see you tomorrow

#

The bar. I see the bar in the distance, the lights begging for the attention of the passers-by. I see you there, standing, fidgeting with the cable of your headphones and slightly dancing to the rhythm of the song in your ears. I already know what you're listening to, how you want to imitate the bass riff with your hands, how it makes you slightly headbang as if you were at one of the gigs we used to go to.

You haven't seen me yet, and I wonder if that's the reason you let yourself loose so easily. The image of you is now imprinted in my eyes. As I walk closer, I start to notice that you don't have your usual jacket.

What happened to it? Did one of the patches we so hardily worked to sew in the leather fall off? Did you forget your umbrella one too many times when it was pouring rain? But I decide to stay silent as your eyes stumble upon my stare, and your back straightens and your hands reach for the headphones. Now you've seen me, and there's no more space for looseness.

Like two animals, we cautiously dance around each other, uncertain of how to approach one another. Who will attack, and who will have to fight back? In this dance, your face is all I can see. Your dark eyes, your lips - those lips I won't touch anymore! - and those rosy cheeks whose softness I remember oh so dearly. We both hesitate before saying hi (all of those unspoken words stuck in the throat make it hard to even breathe). You're still defensive, and I'm defenceless. For the longing for your eyes on me once again I betrayed myself, and

now there's no escape.

We let the music in the bar overflow the silence between us. You choose the table by the counter, the same table where everything started. Where 'us' started. Is it a coincidence? Do you still remember that?

You order beer - as usual - and I order an orange-based cocktail - as usual - and the conversation finally takes off amid the tension.

Pretending we're friends who haven't seen each other in a while, I ask you what you've been up to since (since we last kissed? Since we last shared my bed?), and you give your vague, intricate answers, careful not to let your real feelings slip out: working at the bar, practising with the new band you're in, looking for a better job. The sense of familiarity floods my senses.

I notice you still wear the ring I gifted you on one of our trips.

Has anything even changed? Your hair has got longer. You don't wear nail polish anymore. Your eyes don't shine as bright anymore. A certain weariness seems to loom over you, an aftermath of the moments of weakness you confine within the walls of your room. I know those moments, I've witnessed the blood and tears of it all, and I can't help but wonder what you've left unsaid.

"How was your day?", I ask.

"I went to practise at the music studio with Y., we're working on a project together for a gig"

"Oh, still noise music?"

"Yeah, we're trying to make it with some screams and growls. We already made one song about death, it's pretty cool"

"About death, huh. You really haven't changed" I say, as I try to hide the smirk behind the palm of my hand.

You slowly retreat to the seatback. "Some things do, some don't" you reply with sudden

coldness. I look down and start to fidget with my glass. “I guess you’re right.”

The night proceeds with one drink after another, the bar gets crowded, and the uneasiness slowly leaves space to the liveliness of the night. The bittersweet feeling of the past enmeshing with the present inebriates the conversation. “You remember when the singer of that boy band tried to smooch the shit out of me and, when I told you, you started to wingman me shamelessly? And the guy was drunk as hell!”, you amusedly ask; “How could I forget that?” I reply, barely holding my laughter. Your back is leaning towards the table and your elbows are taking in the weight of your chest on your shoulders, yet you appear incredibly relaxed. I hadn’t seen you like this in such a long time.

“I’m glad I texted you”, with the boldness that only a nice gin cocktail can give.

“Me too”, you say in a timid smile. I let out a grin, but I don’t care. I could be a clueless rabbit and you could be a hungry lion, and I would still rip my ribcage open for you.

Bar after bar, the lights of the streets dance with us in the cold of the winter night, and after some hours we find ourselves on the way to my house. You wanted to accompany me home, you said; “my house is on the way anyway”, you said. I know the game you’re playing; we had been playing it for a long time already. I feign ignorance, and let you guide me in the streets you have long known. The streetlights become dimmer and dimmer as we walk further away from the city centre. I look up, my neck tipping back, and the starry night appears before my eyes; my mouth falls open before the dark, star-sprinkled sky, and I am rendered speechless. By pure reflex, I put your arm around mine, fixed on gazing at the view, before I realise what I’ve done. I quickly retract my arm, and you briefly look at me before turning your head towards the road ahead again. You, too, must have realised how fragile we are right here, right now, on this dim-lit street, and perhaps that’s why you let the silence coddle this indulgence of ours, this game we play. You lift your head up, looking for an answer with those

big eyes of yours; but in those big eyes of yours there is none.

The silence invades the air we breathe, and we keep walking.

“Well, here we are”, I say, stopping at the stairs in front of the entrance, “it was nice seeing you again”. You stand in front of me, and the cold lights of the building illuminate your face.

“For me too”, you reply. You pause for a second or two before uttering my name.

“Leila”, you say, and my chest is set aflame.

‘Leila’, you said, in the way you had always pronounced it, in the way you called me when we became nothing more than lovers once again.

You look at me with such intensity, and yet I don’t feel like hiding.

I don’t feel like running away, and I don’t feel like anything else matters but your gaze upon me, the hand you’re gently moving towards my right cheek, your lips pressing against mine, your eyes closing to savour this moment.

I pull you closer, claw my fingers at your waist, and I feel your chest against mine, our hips touching; you deepen the kiss, and I can’t help but to embrace your back in my arms in the desperate, desperate attempt to feel our bodies merge under the cold nocturnal lights. You slowly pull your head back, our foreheads one against the other, and our eyes interlock. I now remember what honey tastes like, dripping from your lips onto mine on this cold winter night. We let out chuckles under our breaths; you smile, and I desperately try to hold back the tears.

“Let’s go inside.” “Yes.”

Your silhouette once again inhabits the bed where it all began. The weight of your body on mine, your chest pressed against mine, hips to hips, palm to palm. In bed, you have no kindness. You hastily take off your upper clothes before starting to kiss me again; my hands grab your naked hips, I pull you closer, your back bends to the will of my touch, you

take off my top and kiss my neck fiercely, as if you had been longing for it more than you would like to admit. The last remnants of our armours – your jeans, my pants, our underwear – are messily laying on the floor of the room, and we are left prey to each other's gaze. The darkness of the night is my last stronghold against your scrutiny; yet I'm defenceless against the way you abruptly pull my legs against your hips, slightly arch your back, and kiss my chest with unprecedented gentleness, before making yourself welcome between my legs.

How long had you been waiting for this opportunity, for this moment to realise?

I feel the anticipation in every thrust, and the memory of what we were resurfaces in how we move in unison, dancing a long-forgotten song we learnt by heart.

My mind is taken back to the first time, the aggressiveness of it, the awkwardness of exploring a stranger by trial and error, *the performance of it*. We were only strangers once, drinking one too many glasses of cheap gin on the floor of my new, empty house, laughing away. We were only strangers once, learning to understand one another for a night.

It happened by chance, with no meaning to it, and we attached one little by little, time after time, until it became ours.

Now I know the way your body twitches and bends and turns and bleeds under my fingertips; now you know the weak spot of my neck that makes my back arch in pleasure and how I love to feel your bites on my waist and your hands grabbing my hips from behind.

You know what notes to hit, and I know what instrument we're playing.

After some time, the inebriated indulgence of the night soothes our senses into oblivion. I haven't seen you this peaceful, harmless, and defenceless in so long.

Even while asleep, your arm steadily embraces my shoulders against your body.

This is what you would do after every time, after all.

And every time, I would put my arm around your waist, gently moving the tip of my nails in circles on your skin.

Sometimes, I would affectionately caress your face with the back of my hand, slowly tracing

its outline, and I would let out the warmth in my chest in the most tender of smiles.

Nonetheless, tonight I have to fight the urge to make you mine again. I let out a long sigh and try to make myself comfortable. I lie on your chest, mimicking the way you inhale and exhale heavily, and your heartbeat finally lulls me to sleep.

#

‘What the-’

The sun intrudes through the curtains, waking me up with no mercy. ‘This headache is killing me’, I think to myself, looking for the paracetamol near the bed. I turn my head to the other side, and there I find your innocently sleeping face sinking into the pillow.

I pause for a second, uncertain about how to feel. I have let you in my sheets again. What have I done?

I slowly slide my body away from you, terrified at the implications of your naked body under the duvet.

What do I do now? It feels like a stranger has inhabited the bed; but it’s you. The ‘you’ to whom I have confided all my deepest secrets, the ‘you’ with whom I would share the meals we’d cook together, the ‘you’ I would peel oranges for.

The ‘you’ who, for a night of lame cruelty, threw it all away.

Unsure if I should indulge in this cursed dream a bit longer, I look at you in search of answers. Your figure draws my eyes from your naked back to the drowsy expression on your face, and a strange, uncomfortable warmth pervades my chest. I quickly retract my gaze, hurriedly fix my hair, and put on whatever has a semblance of a pyjamas.

With a pill of paracetamol in my hand, I carefully get up and walk on tiptoe to the kitchen for a glass of water. I pour some water in the electric kettle, and while I wait for the water to boil, I put some black tea leaves in the teapot. I take out a mug, contemplating if I should get



another one for you. The tea leaves open before my eyes, releasing the earthy scent of pu'er into the air.

I decide to start my day as usual, as if it's a normal morning of a normal day, alone in my home. I light a cigarette on the balcony and let the morning sun stroke my cheeks to the faint beat of my recent favourite songs. Feeling a bit lightheaded, I find shelter in the warmth of the *kotatsu* in the living room, where I sip on the warm tea.

“What a lovely morning”, I tell myself, in the attempt to keep at bay the thought of your sleeping face lingering in my mind. I look before me, pointing my eyes to the glass sliding doors of my bedroom. I can't help but feel like I've never woken up from the surreal dream of last night. Of your lips on mine. Of your eyes on me once again.

#

Shortly after the breakup, when we would cross each other at the bar, we would avert our gaze to feign placid indifference. You would look at me, pausing for a second before looking away and resuming your conversation, and I would muster the strength to come near you by the counter, look just straight ahead of me and talk to the bartender with the calmest voice and the unusually warmest of smiles.

Back then, we were a matter of two existences casually brushing each other for a brief moment.

Then I would go back to my table where my friends waited, laugh with them louder than usual, smile more, sometimes chat with nice strangers by the counter, and later tremble in the privacy of the restroom.

In those moments, I couldn't help but shake from inside out, as if my bones suddenly turned cold and my heart stopped pumping oxygen in my veins. How was that possible, if that same heart was beating so hard that I wanted to rip it out of my ribcage and flush it down the toilet?

Still, every time I would take a deep breath and go back to my friends, laugh louder, and smile more.

From time to time, I would hear you across the room, visibly drunk, trying to talk with one-time faces about your future music projects and wild past adventures. I wouldn't invade further; I know of your stories of getting drunk and falling asleep on random benches in random parks until the police would come to check up on you. I know of the myriads of drugs you'd take with complete strangers on your first trip to Europe. Other people would be amused, amazed even, and I could not abstain from visibly rolling my eyes.

My friends would look at me and laugh with complicity under their breath. "They're doing it again, aren't they?", they would ask, amused, and I would let out a scornful smirk.

Everyone in our group of friends knew of your 'adventures'; everyone knew that drinking is not the only thing you exaggerate with, and that when you drink you let out more than you should, for better or worse.

Even earlier, at the beginning of our relationship, we would smoke on the balcony of my apartment at night, and you would lose yourself in tales of grandiose escapades and teenage wilderness.

At the time, I enjoyed the sound of your voice, how you would smile at the nostalgic recollection of your past, the way you would make your life seem so full of vivacity, fortuitous encounters, one-time opportunities and experiences that pushed the boundaries of the ordinary I was so bored of.

It seemed that underneath those dark eyes and raven hair you shone like a star, and I wanted that light to illuminate my path. I wanted you to be the Northern Star that would accompany my journey through the storms plaguing the dark nights, and I wanted to be the place you could finally call home. It was all new and electrifying, and I couldn't get enough of you.

At the beginning of our relationship, you would make whatever leftover was in the

fridge into the most delicious meals, and I would help you with the preparations while choosing the music to play and slightly moving to the rhythm.

Sometimes, while you were at the stove, focused on the pan, I would leave a peck on your cheek by surprise, suddenly startling you; some others, I'd succeed in distracting you with a slightly more provocative kiss tracing from your neck to your hips with the tip of my lips.

You would jokingly get upset, and you would say things like "love, I'm cooking!", or "you're going to regret this soon, trust me", with a certain mischievous laugh under your breath, and I would laugh your threats away, secretly hoping for your payback later in bed.

"We are meant to be", I used to think while gently stroking your hair in bed.

Or while we were watching shows together, cuddling on the sofa.

And when walking to the grocery store in the placid afternoon air, drinking at the usual bar on Friday nights, and while sitting together on the beach at midnight, with a cigarette on the right hand and your hand gently placed on my left.

I used to believe in it often, even in the most trivial moments, and you would reassure my conviction with every *I love you's* pressed against my skin (you loved to kiss my forehead with such tenderness my chest would set aflame), and the "I've never met someone like you", the "I've never loved someone like you" and the "I want to build a future with you" you would say often times. I used to uphold that belief above any bump on the road we had after, and beyond every drunken tantrum and rage-filled fit of jealousy you would throw as the time together progressed.

I wanted to believe that above all, we were one of the same, two faces of the same coin. After all, I wanted to believe with all my soul and body that you loved me as much as I did you, despite the evidence.

#

The morning sun knows no secrets, he who strips away the illusions of the night. In the stillness of the morning, the silence of the furniture and the creaking of the wooden floor, you sluggishly woke up. Through the sliding doors, I see your head slowly turning to the other side of the bed. I want to say, 'I'm here,' but remain silent, watching your blurred figure rise from the bed and search for last night's clothes. Your figure is in black once again, as it approaches the handles of the doors and opens to the living room. You look at me, and I turn my gaze down to the mug. 'I still have some tea left', I think to myself. The quiet engulfs these four walls once again. You take your jacket off the clothing rack; I get up and follow you to the corridor.

Perhaps, in another time I would have asked you the reasons walking out of the door is always easier than meeting my eyes, appeased your anger in spite of mine. "I understand you're angry, but please, don't yell, let's cool off and talk about it", I would have said in utter tenderness, betraying once again my better judgement.

Instead, I walked you to the door, words unspoken lingering in the air.

Though, was there anything to speak of? Was there anything that these walls hadn't heard already? So, I lean on the walls while still sipping on my tea, watching you putting on your shoes and opening the door. You slightly nod goodbye. I slightly nod back, and the door creaks as you step out of my life once again.

I go back to the kitchen, leaving the empty mug in the sink, and, as I turn my eyes, I glance over the mug on the table full of tea, now cold.