

R.E.M.

“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.” By Pablo Neruda

Just imagine being so in love, you'd rather die than live a life where *they're* dead. I imagined it as I sat on a ShuttleDove, fastest railway in the Midwest, coming home after leaving my lover in a grave. I was headed to Sogrum proper, where we had lived for sixteen years. There, together, we had imagined a world full of art, careers, memories, joys, sorrows, friends, and a home. Apart now, one in the grave, and me sitting on a fucking metro on my way back to a vacuum sealed flat.

I imagine a hard lump of coal in my stomach, a constant pain since the moment I found out about Easron.

I had been in Tuscallu when a doctor had called me. Tuscallu was a full eight-hour metro-express away, and I had pleaded with the doctor to keep him alive until I could get there. I imagined the doctor had said, “I will do what I can, Ms. Cito.”

I imagined the metro terminal, where I stood in line for a ticket home. I imagined calling Easron's mum and telling her what happened. I'd phoned her, talking fast, so she couldn't.

When I finally stopped. She had said, ‘What? No, Mia, you're not listening. Why are you telling me about Easron? I called to tell you what happened! The paramedics tried calling your number first but when you didn't answer they called me.’ Easron's mum had said, choking on

her tears. I imagined she didn't know what the fuck she was saying. I imagined I should repeat what the doctor had said about his fugue state.

"Mia, Easron isn't in a coma! You've said that three times now. He is dead. He was dead before the paramedics arrived." She'd spoken in her soft Israeli accented English. His mum was in Grassend, our hometown, yelling at me on the phone about my dead lover, her son. She was crying hard now, her tears wetting my own eyes. She was always a gentle person, but she was fucking wrong, I imagined.

The doctor had called me and said, "I will do what I can, Ms. Cito." But maybe I didn't really believe it, because I let the phone slip out of my hand as I juggled the hastily packed carry-on and one of Easron's tee's, scrunched tight in my fist. I didn't pick up the phone, but instead slouched down, resting indelicately on my ass, next to it. My hippie skirt flared out dramatically around me. My dark hair, limply curled around my face, grief and disbelief oozing from my form. A sob escaped me, someone stopped, bent down and asked me something. I didn't respond.

I imagined this was going to be a nightmare, coming home without him. We had been together for seventeen years, sixteen of them in Sogrum at the same flat. I didn't handle the news of his accident well in that terminal sixteen days ago. I had imagined a truth that allowed me to remain upright and functional. But I didn't hold on to it for long. My weeping had revealed the truth. Easron's mum had imagined the correct version of events.

But I was now out of tears. And ready for a new reality. I was imagining myself outside of the ShuttleDove watching my face pressed to the window inside. I imagined that the coffee I

had devoured moments before, was dosed with a hallucinogenic that tore me out of my body, and offered me up to OtherWorld, where I would find Easron.

I imagined that as I fly away, leaving my body behind, I'm carried on the wind to OtherWorld. This is a place Easron, and I had envisioned for our afterlives. Neither of us believed in anything concrete enough to hope for upon our deaths.

So, we created a place to meet, OtherWorld, our after-first-life experience. There we would find one another if ever we got separated. I had imagined our faces when we made the promise to always find one another, even inside of death. We had been shining and full.

I started to imagine the cloudy mist of my life rise, as I drifted into something more than a dream, but less than a life. It wasn't a tangible heaven, or a waiting room before judgement. It wasn't a room full of virgins, or a steam bath just for one. It was the place we had made together over the years, Easron and I. Large comfortable places to sit, lots of trees and water. Sunshine, and shade. We had planned for all the seasons in our OtherWorld.

It didn't matter that we spent lots of evenings planning life after we died. We weren't overly social people outside of our respective careers. We liked being together, we had the same thoughts at the same time, however macabre. Our plans for death somehow affirmed the mundane parts of our life. We knew this was the good stuff. What more could we have asked for in love?

I imagined that I was now in OtherWorld floating, because of course we had planned to float. And I don't have to look for Easron long, he'd only been gone for sixteen Earth days. I saw him by a waterfall. He was with several people, none I knew, though they smelled familiar. He

was laughing and playing with a small Tampico-colored lizard that was scampering up and down his arms. Easron looked like himself, but different, more solid somehow, than even on Earth.

His face had been so familiar, that sometimes I'd let him blur around the edges, just so I could re-find his loveliness. Those dark deep eyes, the slender but strong hands, his face a square set upon a tall neck. His figure ensconcing me whenever we were near enough.

I imagined that when he saw me, he looked startled, but in a good way. And that he placed the lizard on the vibrant carpets spread out over the liquid looking grass. He stood and rushed toward me, but on a version of wheels instead of floating or his Earth feet.

I imagined that he had designed these extra bits of afterlife without me. I wanted to be jealous but was too relieved to see him. He embraced me in the satisfying way I always loved. His face felt the same, and he smelled like himself.

"I've found you. You're really here!" I said, pulling his face closer.

"Of course. Where else would I be?" He said and nestled my brow and hair. We kissed like we had for our first. We stood breath on breath for a few moments, parting slowly.

"Did you know you were gone? Was it like we thought?" I asked. I imagined I felt him tense.

"Well, it was, and it wasn't." He said, pulling further back from me. His eyes leapt into mine.

"The accident...I don't remember. But I know it happened. Death, well, that was awkward, and then it wasn't. I was here and felt relieved. I knew I didn't want to be in a broken body unable to move, lost in a dream coma." He said, seeming strained at even the mention.

“No pain? You look whole. You feel whole. I thought we would be more ephemeral in OtherWorld.” I said, really looking at him now. He was doing the same to me.

“Yeah, it’s just for looks ya’ know, this old form, but I wanted to remember my body for a while longer. You look like a whisper in the wind. Did you get in an accident too? Are *you* in a coma fugue??” He asked. I imagined him looking frustrated that such a thing could interrupt our OtherWorld utopia.

“No. I took drugs. Some good ones.” I say quickly at the look on his face. We had promised no more drugs.

“Remember Marnnie? She is a pharma rep now for this nano bot drug that lets you be dead without being dead. It’s complicated. I don’t really know what will happen.” I said, a bit ashamed of my impulsive act. He frowned, and the sky seemed to darken. I smiled and hoped it would clear, but instead a shadow fell heavier around us.

“Ok. So, you’re here with me now...permanently? You don’t know how the drug works? Did Marnnie not have clinical research to back up this new drug?” He asked, rapid fire. I imagined his questions were inappropriate for OtherWorld. Who cared if the drug was approved by government agencies? A worrisome rain began to rinse us. I imagined I should appease him.

“She said that out of the three thousand participants in the Phase 3 testing period, only two had the exact same experience after their bodies shut off. The imagined results ranged from every religious narrative trope, to paradises, limbos, and some dream like oddities. But that was the results of only four hundred of the participants. The rest, well they chose,” I looked around for a better word than our special OtherWorld, but I couldn't think of anything, “this, instead of

life on Earth.” I stopped and tried to imagine what he was thinking, because now I didn’t know, not here, not yet.

“I want to say I’m shocked you did this, but I’m not. It feels like you just killed yourself. Will you stay a ghost or only until your Earth body dies?” Easron asks. He looks less worried now, but also less ok with how I got here. I could imagine his agitation at the hint of suicide. We had promised each other never to do it. We both had demons chasing us, but we *promised* to fight for our Earth life, always. I’d broken that promise. But his pre-mature death was a broken promise too.

“If this is the outcome, I’m ok with it. I chose it willingly. I knew the…” I’m stopped short by a loud whistle and chug of thunder. The sky cracks open, and a twister whirls from underneath our feet, dark clouds enveloping me.

Easron is shaking his head, and screaming ‘No!’, but I imagine it’s just the memory of his scream I’m hearing.

I spun around and around, losing sight of Easron. I was being propelled up, and over? Yes, over. I was being propelled up and over. A flight away from OtherWorld? It must be my Earth body pulling me back home.

I fought it. I wanted to stay with Easron, it was my conscious choice, not my bodies! I would give up the mostly healthy Earth body to live with Easron forever. But I wasn’t in control. Either the drug was or OtherWorld. I screamed for real now.

I imagined my scream slowed the twister, and gently set me down to the liquid grass, next to Easron’s lizard. But I opened my eyes to find a very different view. I was sitting in the crater of some gigantic rock. I wiggled my ghosty fingers around, shocked at my translucence.

I imagined I saw a path out of the crater and began to crawl up, terror making me fast.

But still the plateau took me a long time to reach, and my form looked like dripping paint. What I saw made me wish I had stayed in the crater. My breath seemed to freeze in the air. My ghost arms wrapping around me did nothing to provide warmth.

The biggest fuck you? Well, there were stars all around me, a galaxy in fact, something like Easron and I had always dreamed of seeing together. I looked around, there was nothing but darkness and greyed out craters pocketed all over the circumference of this place. It was a void, or maybe the moon. I tried to scream, but I had no voice. I laughed without sound, it would have been a pitiful scared laugh, I imagined.

I took my time descending into deep despair. I floated around every inch of this star, rock, planet? I imagine it's a little of all those things. But there are no other inhabitants, nothing that breathes, no water or light.

And so, I slump again to the ground, like in the metro terminal, the melting ghost form fanning out around me, my face withered and weeping. I had aged so much for what felt like only a day. I hovered my form parallel with the surface of the ground. My eyes staring at a vastness I wouldn't ever have imagined. This might be it. I didn't want it to be!

I imagined I heard a sound. I imagined someone was trying to wake me. Was it you?