

Creative Writing

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I. Workshop Pieces

Workshop 1.4

Hydra

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“You can sit in the front. If you want?”

“No”

She was good at rules. The back of the car was familiarity, a self-inflicted prison. At six, her father had taught her that laws are hardly ever absolute, it's only a matter of finding the right loophole to make the whole thing come crashing down like a house of cards. She'd built herself up from half truths and grey areas. Even now, her seat belt lay unfastened at her side, an infinitesimal rebellion.

“Turn left here. I need to avoid the highway”

She drowned out the driver's stuttering reply, something about gravel roads and dust, and rested her head against the grimey window. Through the glass, caked grey with grime, the sky seemed almost appropriately gloomy. It was a lie, of course, she'd already seen the offending blue when she left the funeral, almost impolite in its brightness. Most of the invitees had been wearing sunglasses. Sunglasses and black gowns, *mantilla y peineta* for the ladies, pin-stripe trousers and polished shoes for the gentlemen. And sunglasses, which, Lerna thought, they'd worn not to hide red and puffy eyes, but the total absence of tears. Her father was not a loved man.

But he was fair. She toyed with the stacks of thin paper in her bag. If she dug any deeper, she knew what she'd find: cool metal and small packs of 9mm Luger bullets. Exactly three packs of Marlboro red, a copy of Guerra y Paz. It was an operating manual, a vade mecum, and an itinerary map in itself.

A slap to the face. True nature does not rely on equations and formulas, only pure and unfiltered instinct; you cut a head and another grows, not because it must, but because it can do nothing else. But Don Manuel had birthed no sons, only a daughter born too early, oxygen cut off from her little purple face, who had spent every year since gasping for breath and hanging on his every command. Now, the commands and orders took the form of half a million in cash, an aged glock, and some cigarettes – not exactly subtle.

Lerna had found a loophole early on, mulling over her next step as they lowered his body into the wet ground: he hadn't left her a time limit, she had no deadline. She would have to return, of course; his death had left a gaping power void, a festering wound which would cause unrest if left untreated. But she had some time.

“...long?”

The driver had a nice voice, deep but scraping like a cat's tongue.

“I'm sorry, I wasn't listening,” she made her voice as apologetic as possible, wishing she could tug upwards at the corners of her mouth to erase the grimace she knew was there,

“You were saying?”

His eyes flicked to hers in the rearview mirror, shy but curious. He wasn't much older than her, she thought, with some remorse.

“Just wondering, you know, if you're doing fine. We can stop at a gas station if you need to call someone”

“I'm fine”

Smile, just smile.

“Are you? I mean, it's the first time I pick a woman, I mean anyone, from a funeral,”

The Driver brushed a lock of black hair away and stared resolutely ahead, clearly nervous.

“I'm fine”

“Okay, okay. I'll back off. I was just wondering, you know... I mean. You have a lot of money, sure—”

“Yes”

“I just, I think I have to call the company. I mean if it’s gonna be long. It’s a bit unusual, that’s all”

Lerna didn’t answer, trying to think. Calling the company was no good, she couldn’t let that happen. Think. There must be a loophole. There always is.

She’d been sitting at the foot of the bed when he died, droplets ricocheting against the widows like stray bullets. It wasn’t a good death, a sepulture of oxygen cylinders and a chorus of incessant beeping. Doña María had insisted on the candles, the kind you see in church, made of sickly sweet red wax. Every night, she kneeled her small and fragile frame over an old prie-dieu from before the war, and prayed for his soul, repeating *padre nuestro* and *ave maria* and wailing in between, a high piercing sound that could be heard through the house. There was nothing that could be done for his soul, in Lerna’s opinion, and if anything the candles had accelerated his demise, the thick scented smoke piling on top of the tar in his lungs.

His last breath had been a violent rattle, a convulsion which shook his body whole as liquid rose in his throat. Lerna had stared idly as he choked, resting her hand softly on his trembling knee. There was always a loophole, he’d taught her as much. After, when the shrill beep of the heart monitor had stilled, she grabbed a candle from the bedside table and planted the flame firmly on the ink branded into her arm. The small serpent succumbed slowly, almost moving as the charred flesh mashed with the intricate detail. It was a catharsis, her own Boston tea party, a temporary goodbye.

Lerna could hear the pouring rain still in the funeral home, even though the sun burned true and undeniable through the painted glass windows. She could feel the wetness in her skin long after leaving. She didn’t have to look inside the black leather bag, she knew the contents well enough. Her father had managed to sentence her for his death, even beyond the grave. Her burned down tattoo nothing now but a mockery of the freedom that was just beyond her reach. But she had some time, still.

She walked briskly out of the funeral home, a plan brewing slowly in her mind. A loophole. The taxi was waiting around the corner, the driver a dark and anonymous figure behind the steering wheel, smiling nervously as she entered through the back.

Silence.

“Where to, then?”

She tried to avoid looking at him, keeping him a dark and anonymous figure would be easier. She didn’t need any more baggage. Either way, she always had a talent for knowing trouble, and his soft eyes looking back inquisitively were as clear a signal as any. Lerna smiled back.

“Madrid”

Workshop 2.4

When There’s Nothing Left to Burn You Have To Set Yourself on Fire

Like all autobiographies, this one is a lie

I met him in October. Back then, if you’d told me that by the end of the year I’d find myself in a high-security mental institution I wouldn’t have found it very strange at all, as I was already set upon a path of self-destruction by the time the semester started.

The night before I had dreamed of Shamhat, wearing a white toga and holding a glass of orange juice, blonde hair almost transparent in the morning light. This consecrated figure had stuck around with me for most of the day, but had vanished again by the time the sun went down, replaced by the human woman who was now sitting next to me on the bathroom floor. I watched her roll another joint, her hair now almost black, greasy and pulled back into a bun. Weed was better than narcotics, in any case, but combined with the drink it made my brain swell with blood, pulse beating fast against my temples. I bent over to barf, welcoming the familiar white glow burning through my synapses like molten lava.

That last year spent in Santiago we lived in the old town, which meant I spent an outrageous amount of money on taxi rides that semester. To be honest, it would have probably been cheaper to retake all my classes, but academic failure never quite agreed with me, and I desperately needed an excuse to escape my parent’s house. Sleep deprivation meant I left class often, to buy 50 cent coffee at the broken-down machine or to splash the bathroom’s yellowy brown water in my face and down the back of my neck. I never had time to shower before class, and I carried around with me the musty smell of humid, unwashed sheets.

Living in the old town also meant our flat was all chipped paint and black corners, shoved in the narrow space between a row of identical houses and an abandoned convent. At the beginning, I will admit I was also enamoured with the atemporal feel of the identically narrow streets that surrounded us, but the main reason we picked that shitty two person apartment was so that Shamhat could be close to the philosophy faculty, only a few cobblestone streets away.

Although the semester had just begun, the eclectic mix of happy hippies and bohemian chainsmokers that populated the building were much preferable to the stuck up grammarians I was forced to share my mornings with. A small group of students in Shamhat's year had managed to rent an entire building, three floors of broken down Ikea furniture and multicolored mandalas hanging off the walls, with a small attic that overlooked the cathedral. It wasn't long before we got an invite to this promised eden.

"Schopenhauer was just a sad little man who couldn't get pussy and we have to listen to him. Why?" Corine screamed and paused, looking at us with wide, bloodshot eyes, "because he's old and white!"

She was French, a former erasmus student who, seduced by the perpetual rain, had decided to stay in Santiago, erasing one letter from her name as the ultimate act of insurgence to her origins. I was desperately jealous.

From under her arm, Oscar rolled his eyes.

"Ah Corinne, mais tu es comme lui..." he replied, batting his eyelashes at her like an enamoured maiden, "*le bonheur consiste en une répétition fréquente du plaisir, oui?*"

I looked away just as Corine raised her hand to bat him away. How they achieved this level of effortless pretentiousness evaded me, but the crowd seemed perfectly impervious to the display, all focused on some elaborate drinking card game which lay in the round table we surrounded. "Andrea" slurred Shamhat, "down your drink!"

I shook myself awake, acutely aware of the fact that the entire group was now staring up at me with interest. Unlike Shamhat, who had gotten to know them in class, I was a newcomer.

Her honest, almost equine disposition gave her an advantage making friends I could only dream of. Shamhat's clear blue eyes and dirty blond hair were also a novelty. She'd taken after her father, a huge man with a curly mop of white hair who could've easily passed for one of Stevenson's famous characters in *Treasure Island*. If you looked at them together, you'd be surprised to find that her mother and sisters were all perfectly customary spaniards, with the same tan, leathery skin and thick brown hair that I saw in the mirror every day. In contrast, I had half hoped to go unnoticed, free to observe the rambunctious group from the sidelines, but had been unlucky enough that the group was small that night, and Corine had commanded all of us to play that stupid game.

Well fuck. If I took three more shots I wasn't sure I'd make it to the toilet.

"Is there a way I can get out of this?" I asked, smiling nervously.

Shamhat looked at Corine with half-lidded eyes, clearly wishing I'd picked the easy three shots. Corine looked at me like a hawk who's just spotted a newborn rabbit, and instructed me to pick a card from the bunch.

"Three of swords!" she squealed, delighted, "*parelletes!*"

I sighed. I knew how this part went, and started getting up. Parelletes was one of Corine's sadistic inventions, a game within the game. I was to close my eyes and point at the crowd at random, selecting my partner for the game. Then, we'd be made to stand back-to-back, drinks in our hands, while the crowd asked us questions, usually either dirty or appallingly offensive, and couldn't sit back down until we both drank at the same time. I felt Shamhat's cold hands on my naked shoulders as she rotated me on the spot, my hand arm extended and finger pointing forwards. 1, 2, 3...

I finally opened my eyes.

If I'd had the mind of an engineer, as my father had always so intensely wished, I would have attributed the feeling that the Earth had been flipped on its axis and I'd been violently flung over the board to the fact that I was already unsteady even before Shammi decided to play peg-top with my body, crushed up 30mg caffeine pills battling the THC in my bloodstream.

But even now, I am a Romantic, and as I locked eyes with the stranger in front of me, pointing at him like a judge or executioner, I felt that I'd crossed some invisible line, damning the rest of my storyline to hell in an irrevocable way, with no more agency than your average character in a novella.

I knew him, vaguely, from the few afternoons I'd picked Shamhat up from class. He looked aristocratic, almost, high cheekbones and olive skin with a slightly jaundiced tint contrasting with dark eyes and equally dark circles under them. He had dyed black hair, with light reddish brown roots showing. An unsurprising sign of vanity, I already knew most of that group's disheveled, unkempt style was no less carefully arranged than that of a vogue magazine debutante.

"Fuck you Corine, I'm not even playing" he rasped out, taking a drag of his black cigarette, without a single look in my direction.

Jesus. I remembered now, even though he was undeniably attractive, the whole reason I did not ask Shamhat his name was that air of affected ostentation that dragged behind him like an unpleasant stench.

"Well that's fucking rude" I blurted out, forcing myself to stare.

It was true, he'd been sitting a little far from the circle, talking in hushed whispers with a blue-haired girl that had since turned to her phone. They really could care less about me, I thought, feeling a familiar yearning pierce through the cloud of apathy that had governed my every thought since the start of the semester.

Seemingly, though, I'd picked his attention, and I observed with some curiosity how his demeanor changed as he stood up, cigarette still hanging from his lips as they curled into a smile.

"Oh hey! You're new" he seemed genuinely surprised at the fact, looking back at Corine with a raised eyebrow before turning to me, "I'm sorry, I thought you were one of these pathetic bastards"

In spite of my reservations, my brain had already been overruled by the reptilian wish to be enticing, to get the prize. For me, every move is calculated but exhausting, the vodka cloud over my thoughts not helping in the slightest.

“What’s the game again?” he asked, slower this time. Right, I was still staring.

“Uhh, parelletes. Sorry”

Only after we were done, I realized we’d been standing together for over twenty minutes, answering the spitfire questions the group shot at us. It started easy, *Who has more sex?* I didn’t drink, of course. My sex life was disgraceful. But I did feel a small rumble of laughter in the Stranger’s chest before he raised his arm to drink, under the curious and watchful eyes of blue-hair-girl.

The questions went by in a daze, and I found I could hardly remember the last one after it passed, time blurring together like a dream. I had already drank more than seven shots, my opponent matching me. We had not drank at the same time one time, the crowd now going from giddy and excited to evidently bored.

A bearded guy, much older than the rest of us, raised his voice from his spot next to bluehair. “Alright that’s it Samuel. We have things to do” some rumble of agreement was heard among the rest of the players. *Yeah, you guys are fucking killing me, God.*

Samuel, huh. The irony was not lost on me, with the way he looked it would not surprise me if he really was one of the rebel angels, cast out from heaven for his infamy.

Beard continued, “aaaaaand as we know... who’s a bigger fan of violence?”

By the way he looked at Samuel I assumed this was a private joke between the two, but I Shamhat was already looking at me with a raised eyebrow, obviously daring me to drink. I had maybe been going a little hard on the revolutionary fervor at home these days, as I’d started reading Kropotkin and Dejacque. I raised my glass, one last time, making eye contact with Beard and Bluehair, both looking visibly surprised.

Well, that’s a plot point, I thought, before the drink caught up with me and the world tilted sideways.

In the months that followed, I often wished I could remember the evening that followed the first meeting, as maybe it would explain how his interest in me first started, but sleep deprivation does not do much good for long-term memory, as one might expect.

Shamhat and I visited the commune, as we'd taken to calling it, pretty often in the next few weeks. Oscar and Corine had become regular partners in our smoke filled nights, but Samuel was still an elusive presence, only present in a few of the parties we frequented. I felt the familiar taste of an obsession brewing, my eyes searching for him incessantly when he was there, and staring intermittently at the door when he wasn't.

He was the least of my problems, or so I thought at the time. My grades were dropping fast, as the white and blue tablets I'd added to my bedtime cocktail had made it hard to wake up early enough for my morning classes. I found that three 100mg was enough caffeine to wake me up if snorted directly into the heart, but it meant I spent my days in a shivering mist of confusion, like an amnesiac right after a coma.

I often felt that I was being followed, and I started closing my door with a key every night, Shamhat screaming through the door if I did not leave my room before the next evening. But she had broken up with her high school boyfriend, which meant I was quickly dropping places in her list of priorities, and weed was set to occupy my place in the top as she started fucking her dealer.

I was laying awake, listening to Shamhat and him have furious sex until the early hours of the morning, when I decided to go for a walk through the old town. It was close to the end of December, and the street was covered with a thin layer of ice that made it hard to walk without slipping.

Still, I put on my thick winter coat, and set off, slamming the door hard enough for them to hear. I began to regret it as soon as I walked out and saw the drunken men, five of them, screaming at each other and throwing bottles against the stone walls of the convent. They went silent when I passed them, and then made snide comments I couldn't decipher. Unable to separate neurosis from real danger, I felt the familiar numbness in my teeth and extremities as my heart began picking up speed. I walked by them fast, going over the convent and down the

main artery of the old town. I hadn't meant to stray farther than the little park in front of our building, populated by frail oak trees and rotten benches, but I was certainly too afraid to go back to what seemed like a recipe for rape or murder to my addled mind.

I made my way down fast, looking over my shoulder periodically and staying close to the sides, huddled against the narrow street walls. I hadn't realized I was heading to the commune, but my feet knew the way and yearned for the familiar incense warmth that awaited me there. I began hearing the familiar techno rubble as I turned the corner, the pavement vibrating alongside the beat.

Corine was at the door fast, all short blonde hair and flushed cheeks, a modern Lesley Gore. Her face fell when she saw me.

"Andrea! What are you doing here?"

She seemed nervous, uncharacteristically. I faltered as I tried to explain.

"I- I'm sorry. I thought." I sighed "I don't know what I thought. Listen, I feel like shit and I can't sleep. Can I stay?" I asked.

It was a shot in the dark, too ashamed to explain to a girl who had hitch-hiked her way to France for her seventeenth birthday that I was too afraid of passing by a group of five men—who were now looking more like teenagers in my mind—to go back home.

"Well, you see..." she was visibly concerned, and I wondered if I looked as stupid as I felt, with my woolen pajamas showing under the winter coat, "Samuel, Matilde and the others are working on something right now. But you can stay in the attic, I guess" she said, biting her lip like a misbehaved child, "they do like you."

I had assumed by the sound of the speakers that there was a party going on, but the prospect of seeing him was far better. In retrospect, it would've been far more safe for me to turn back and face the hooligans guarding my door than to enter that building, to spend the first night with Samuel.

That night is when it truly started, in the commune, before that whole mess with the Rosenkreuz, before I got involved with the unity, immutability and goodness of god and the

soul, and my days were permeated by the smell of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. Before I started the swift descent into madness that's landed me in this madhouse, from where I write.

II. Revision

Workshop 2.4

When There's Nothing Left to Burn You Have To Set Yourself on Fire

They met in October. If you'd told Itzal, back then, that by the end of the year he'd find himself in a high-security mental institution he probably wouldn't have found it very strange at all, as he was already set upon a path of self-destruction by the time the semester started.

The night before he had dreamed of Shamhat, wearing a white toga and holding a glass of orange juice, blonde hair almost transparent in the morning light. This consecrated figure had stuck around with him for most of the day, but had vanished again by the time the sun went down, replaced by the human woman who was now sitting next to him on the bathroom floor. He watched her roll another joint, her hair now almost black, greasy and pulled back into a bun. Weed was better than narcotics, in any case, but combined with the drink it made his brain swell with blood, pulse beating fast against his temples. He bent over to barf, welcoming the familiar white glow burning through his synapses like molten lava.

That last year spent in Santiago, Itzal and Shamhat decided to move to the old town, exchanging their claustrophobic pad next to the train station for a decrepit building, all chipped paint and black corners, shoved in the space between a row of identical houses and an abandoned convent. Itzal could care less where they lived, as sleep deprivation meant his days and nights often blurred together in a jumbled mess of Russian literature, cheap 50 cent coffee, and even cheaper vodka mixed with blood red juice. But Shamhat was enamoured with the atemporal feel of the narrow streets that surrounded them, and the building was close to the philosophy faculty, only a few cobblestone streets away.

Although the semester had just begun, the eclectic mix of happy hippies and bohemian chain smokers that populated the building were much preferable to the stuck up grammarians Itzal was forced to share his mornings with. A small group of students in Shamhat's year had managed to rent an entire building, three floors of broken down ikea furniture and multicolored mandalas hanging off the walls, crowned by a small attic that overlooked the cathedral. That night, Shamhat had woken Itzal up a little after sundown, dragging him to the bathroom to splash yellowy brown water in his face and down the back of his neck –he never had time to shower before class, and often carried around with him the musty smell of humid, unwashed sheets– before announcing they had finally gotten an invite to this promised eden.

“Schopenhauer was just a sad little man who couldn't get pussy and we have to listen to him why?” Corine screamed and paused, looking at the others with wide, bloodshot eyes, “because he's old and white!”

She was French, a former Erasmus student who, seduced by the perpetual rain, had decided to stay in Santiago, erasing one letter from her name as a final excommunication from her origins.

From under her arm, Oscar rolled his eyes.

“Ah Corinnne, mais tu es comme lui...” he replied, batting his eyelashes at her like an enamoured maiden, “*le bonheur consiste en une répétition fréquente du plaisir, oui?*”

Itzal looked away just as Corine raised her hand to bat Oscar away. How they achieved this level of effortless pretentiousness evaded him, but the rest seemed immune to the display, all focused on some elaborate drinking card game.

“It-Itsal” slurred Shamhat, “down your drink!”

He shook himself awake, acutely aware of the group's curious eyes staring up at him. Unlike Shamhat, who had gotten to know them in class, he was a newcomer. Her honest and strong-willed disposition gave her an advantage making friends he could only dream of, and her clear blue eyes and dirty blond hair were enough of a novelty to attract half of the male population of Santiago, and a quarter of the rest. She'd taken after her father, but her mother and sisters were all perfectly customary Spaniards, with the same tan leathery skin and thick brown hair that Itzal saw in the mirror every day. He had half hoped to go unnoticed, free to

observe the rambunctious group from the sidelines as Shamhat attracted all the attention, but the group was small that night, and upon walking in, Corine had immediately commanded him to sit on the floor and play.

His stomach lurched at the mere thought of the alcohol mixing with the pills in his stomach.

“Is there a way I can get out of this?”

Shamhat, clearly wishing he’d picked the easy way out, shrugged and directed her half-lidded eyes to Corine, who was looking increasingly like a hawk who’s just spotted a newborn rabbit.

She instructed him to pick another card. They had added so many new rules and exceptions to the game that Itzal didn’t have the slightest idea of what the three swords staring back at him meant, until he heard Corine’s delighted screech.

“*Parelletes!*”

Shamhat looked slightly dismayed, or maybe just high, as she prompted him to get up. She knew how this part went. Parelletes was one of Corine’s sadistic inventions, a diversion from the game’s routine.

The player had to choose a random member of the group to play with, and then they’d both stand back to back while the crowd asked them questions, usually either dirty or appallingly offensive, and couldn’t sit back down until they both drank at the same time. Shamhat had spun him around already, and he extended his arm.

Itzal opened his eyes.

If he’d had the mind of an engineer, as his father had hoped, he may have attributed the feeling that the Earth was flipping on his axis to the crushed up pills battling the THC in his bloodstream. But he was a scholar, if not a poet, and as he locked eyes with the stranger at the end of his pointed finger, he felt the earth finally come to a stop, indubitably changed.

He realized that he knew him, from the few afternoons he’d picked Shamhat up after class. The guy looked almost regular, hollowed cheekbones and olive skin with a slightly jaundiced tint. Not even his hooded eyes and dark circles could be considered much of a special trait in

the circle of philosophers. He had black hair, dyed, judging by the brown roots showing under the fluorescent lights. A surprising sign of vanity, contrasting with the black sweatpants he wore, but Itzal had long ago realized that most of that group's disheveled, unkempt style was no less carefully arranged than that of a vogue magazine debutante.

"Fuck you Corine, I'm not even playing" the guy rasped out, taking a drag of his black cigarette, without a single look in Itzal's direction.

It was true, he had been sitting a little far from the circle, talking in hushed whispers with a blue-haired girl that had since turned to her phone. But the rejection still stung, even if it made him undeniably a bit more attractive. Itzal fidgeted, standing awkwardly with his arm still frozen. *Fuck this*, he thought, the whole reason he'd refused to ask Shamhat to bring him along to the group's hangouts was that air of affected ostentation that dragged behind them like an unpleasant stench.

"Well that's fucking rude"

The guy's demeanor immediately changed and he stood up, cigarette still hanging from his lips as they curled into a horrible smile. Itzal saved time to send a little prayer not to have to fight that night, before staring up at him defiantly.

The guy's eyes went wide as he looked at Itzal. "Oh hey! You're new" he asked, seeming genuinely surprised at the fact. He looked back at Corine with a raised eyebrow before turning to Itzal, "I'm sorry, I thought you were one of these pathetic bastards"

Itzal tried not to be too obvious as he sighed in relief.

"What's the game again?" he asked, slower that time.

Right, the game.

"Uhh, parelletes? Sorry"

The questions started easy, but quickly turned from slightly coy to downright pornographic, and he felt his face go red and his neck grow warm and prickly, the guy's sticky black hair brushing against him with every sip he took.

After standing together for what felt like an eternity but not drinking at the same time even one time (Itzal's sex life was apparently as embarrassingly dry as the guy's was thriving) the crowd had gotten evidently bored, turning their attention elsewhere as they ran out of questions. A bearded guy, much older than the rest, raised his voice from next to the guy's now empty spot.

"Okay, Alexiev! Leave the poor kid alone"

Ouch.

The irony of his name was not lost on Itzal, with the way he dude looked it would not surprise him if he really was a child of the last czar, plagued by some unknown illness.

Bear continued, booming, "SO WHO'S EVER sent someone to the hospital?"

By the way he had looked at Alexiev, Itzal assumed this was a private joke between the two, but Shamhat was already looking up at him with a raised eyebrow, obviously daring him to drink. She was the only one that knew about his high school years, and he could get away with lying, if he wanted.

He had enough time to notice a small red mark on Alexiev's cheek before the drink caught up with him and the world tilted sideways.

In the months that followed, Itzal often wished he could remember the evening that followed their first meeting, hoping it would explain how Alexiev's interest in him had started. But his lifestyle did not do much good for long-term memory, and it wasn't long before he was back to sleeping from five to five, only mustering enough energy to drag himself to his afternoon classes.

Shamhat and him had visited the commune, as they'd taken to calling it, pretty often after that night. Oscar and Corine had become regular partners in their smoke-filled nights, but Alexiev was still an elusive presence, only present in a few of the parties they frequented, and always painfully indifferent. Itzal could take rejection well, but he felt the familiar taste of obsession

brewing. Even Shamhat had noticed his eyes searching for Alexiev incessantly when he was there, and staring intermittently at the door when he wasn't.

But that was the least of Itzal's problems. His grades were dropping fast, as the white and blue tablets he'd added to his bedtime cocktail had made it hard to wake up for the endless stream of exams at the end of the semester. He'd found that 100mg was enough caffeine to wake him up if snorted directly into the heart, but it meant he spent his days in a shivering mist of confusion, like an amnesiac right after a coma.

He often felt like he was being followed, and he'd started closing his door with a key every night, Shamhat screaming and banging on the door if he did not leave his room before the next evening. But she had broken up with her high school boyfriend, which meant Itzal was quickly dropping places in her list of priorities, and weed was set to occupy his place in the top as she started fucking her dealer.

He was laying awake, listening to Shamhat and her guy have furious sex until the early hours of the morning, when the panic waging in his mind became unbearable and he decided to get the hell out of the house.

Walking would be nearly impossible, it was close to the end of December and the street was covered with a thin layer of ice that made it hard to walk without slipping. Still, he put on his thick winter coat and set off, slamming the door hard enough for them to hear.

He began to regret it as soon as he walked out and saw the drunken men, five of them, screaming at each other and throwing bottles against the stone walls of the convent. They quieted down as he walked past, mumbling snide comments he couldn't decipher. Unable to separate neurosis from real danger, Itzal felt a familiar numbness in his teeth and extremities and his heart began picking up speed, making his way down the main artery of the old town.

He really hadn't planned to stray much farther than the little park in front of their building, populated only by frail oak trees and rotten benches, but he couldn't bring himself to go back now. He made his way down fast, looking over his shoulder periodically and staying close to the sides, huddled against the narrow street walls.

Itzal hadn't realized he was heading to the commune, but his feet knew the way and yearned for the familiar incense warmth that awaited him there. Soon, he began hearing the familiar techno rubble as he turned the corner, the pavement vibrating alongside the beat.

Corine was at the door fast, all short blonde hair and flushed cheeks, a modern Lesley Gore. Her face fell when she saw him.

"You! What are you doing here?"

She seemed nervous, uncharacteristically. Itzal faltered as he tried to explain.

"I- I'm sorry. I thought." He sighed "I don't know what I thought. Listen, I feel like shit and I can't sleep. Can I stay?" he asked.

It was a shot in the dark, too ashamed to explain to a girl who had hitch-hiked her way to France for her seventeenth birthday that he was too afraid of passing by a group of five men—who were now looking more like teenagers in his mind—to go back home.

"Well, you see..." she was visibly concerned, and he wondered if he looked as stupid as he felt, with his woolen pajamas showing under the winter coat, "A-Alexiev, Maria and the others are working on something right now. But you can stay in the attic, I guess" she said, biting her lip like a misbehaved child, "they *do* like you."

Itzal had assumed by the sound of the speakers that there was a party going on, but the prospect of seeing Alexiev was far better. Looking back, it would've been far more safe for him to turn back and face the hooligans guarding his door than to enter that building, to spend the first night with Alexiev.

That night is when it truly started, in the commune, before that whole mess with the Rosenkreuz, before he got involved with the unity, immutability and goodness of god and the soul, and his days were permeated by the smell of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. Before he started the swift descent into madness that landed him in the madhouse.

III. In-Class Writing**24 October 2019**

Exercise 95

Oskar was born in a bathtub. His mother, the only daughter of an American heiress and a poor excuse of a British aristocrat, had decided to rebel by simultaneously becoming a hippie and a single mother. She often joked that coming into life under the hot July sun had jostled something in Oskar's brain irrevocably. He spent the first seven years of his life communicating through a mixture of gestures and blank stares. When interviewed, his mother would often confess that she was more surprised when he became a distinguished professor, than she was when he began to kill.

31 October 2019

Exercise 109

He observed as the girl picked at the scabs on her arm. Her skin had taken a bluish tint when looked at through the glass door of the police car, making the ring of bruises on her hips appear even more prominent. She was petite, no older than eighteen or nineteen, with short hair, now stinking of milk and sticking up in every direction. She was not his type, really, not with her small breasts and prepubescent narrow hips. Her friend, on the other hand, had instantly attracted him. She had a nice body, curvy and dark. She was crying now, cradling her left wrist in her hands as Lydia inspected her for weapons, hands lingering slightly as they explored the space between her things. It's a pity, he thought, that beautiful women are so often stupid.

7 November 2019

Exercise 1

The five of them made quite the picture, walking through the corridors. They all possessed that quality only a few privileged people are able to achieve, a certain *je ne sais quoi* that meant: I can do whatever the fuck I want to you and you'll still beg me to love you.

Ezra was the worst of all. He ignored us most of the time, not even maliciously but out pure and simple indifference. Still, I lived on the few smiles and polite nods I received from him, aware that they made me different from the rest of the sheeplike creatures that inhabited the school grounds.

Adrian and Eva shadowed him, almost invariably and his side, like a pair of trained bulldogs. I'd heard rumours that Eva was dating both of them, but nobody ever saw them kiss, not even in the few parties they'd graced with their presence. Then Elsa, a small creature who didn't seem to fit at all, coy and shy like a mouse. Unexpectedly, I'd heard murmurs around the school that her father had paid good money for her to be accepted instead of going to juvie, as she'd apparently stabbed someone in the girls' *academie* she used to attend.

If anyone was exempt from their elitism that was Marcos. Half the school was in love with him, but that wasn't even it. He was effortlessly perfect, all kind smiles and long curls hanging on top of rounded glasses. He was adored by the teachers, receiving high distinctions in every class, and still had taken the time to help out some of the first years, as I'd learned from Ezra's playful jabs.

14 November 2019

Exercise 101

Grantaire grabbed the bayonet, fingers itching to take it apart and put it back together again, a mechanism so ingrained in his muscle memory he hadn't been able to shake it. Not much room for character development when you're dead, after all. He looked at Enjolras, lying face down on the bed. He looked completely devoid of life, but the gasping breaths he took every once and again betrayed him, calming Grantaire's rising heartbeat for a second. Enjolras had always slept with his hand under his pillow, where Grantaire knew he kept the loaded gun he'd stolen after his father's passing. If he could manage enough strength, maybe he could reach it, take it apart, clean it as thoroughly as he could. Maybe then it wouldn't stall, it would keep him safe, maybe—

But he couldn't. His hand stilled on the decrepit gun when he heard the first crack outside the door. He knew what came next, but it had not gotten any easier. He had discovered, during the first five years of the haunting, that he could choose which moment of Enjolras' life to inhabit. He'd spent quite a long time watching him, careless and free, playing with his mother in the garden swings; and a few embarrassing moments in Enjolras' late teens, staring with wide eyes as he had his first fumbling attempt at making love, with some misguided punk from his hometown. But he couldn't help but keep coming back to this, hanging on the hope that this time, just this time, he'd be able to stop it.

He got up, kneeling in front of the door, bayonet aimed and loaded. He was concentrating, droplets of sweat making his hair stick to the base of his neck. One, another crack in the hallways. Two, hand on the trigger, only a few meters away. Tree, fire fire FIRE godDAMNIT.

He stared, helpless, in a cloud of smoke that only he could see, as the intruder barged in for the millionth time, and took one last look at Enjolras. His mouth was frozen on a gasp, a pained look on his eyes as he took his last breath.

28 November 2019

Exercise 110

It would be far more suitable, he thought, if the lake was frozen solid, as it had been five months earlier. The trees seemed inappropriate, almost impolite, in their gleeful display of liveliness. It was noisy, he could hear every insect, the birds and the squirrels, every last

fucking animal on that field. His grief was going to waste in such a scenario, the black suit now crumpled and muddy as he let the lake water permeate his shoes.

She understood him. She'd been following him with her huge, bright green eyes ever since he had arrived, panting and disheveled from running along the path. She had stayed at his side, a quiet but reassuring presence, and had asked no questions, paid no mind to the blood on his hands.

He let his hands run through the feathers on her neck, steadily growing cold and sticking together as the minutes passed. What a hypocrite, he thought, her steady and quiet support emanated from no true friendship, but from the fact that she was a duck. A dead one at that.

5 December 2019

Exercise 64

“Are they still going at it?”
“Why yes, yes they are.”
“Even though-”
“Yeah she’s gonna be pissed when she finds out.”
“You’re not gonna tell her. Are you.”
“I’m dead tired of keeping his secrets, like.”
“Yeah.”
“Yeah he’s not even done the fucking dishes once this week.”
“And mom’s-”
“And mom’s ill! Like what kind of a sick fuck!”
“I’m telling you.”

12 December 2019

Exercise 90

I learned pretty young how to manipulate social situations to my liking. Although I lacked control, then, my tongue would get away from me and trap me in elaborate webs of lies, tales of love and betrayal that I kept going to entertain my audience, until they could not bear my rambling anymore.

I got better, though.

“You like this band?”

I nodded, my head following the hard rhythm of the music, enjoying the way the dude’s eyes followed the movement of my hips as I swayed. I knew the next move: sound approving but not too earnest, bashful but self assured.

Hook, like and sinker.

We ended up at his place, unsurprisingly. I tend to keep strangers out of my space, the white walls and plain bedsheets don’t go particularly well with the vibrant personas I construct for others. Unsafe as it might seem, I was always impervious to my mother’s cautionary tales. I can hold my own in a fight, anyway, and sex is not that much different from one, no less performative.

19 December 2019

Exercise 97

It was hilarious to remember the months before the war, dancing around the bonfire every night, kissing his friends and cackling: IF I CAN'T DANCE IT'S NOT A REVOLUTION as they spun. What now. Now it's december and the street is caked black with smog and bodies lie on the sidewalk and I can't FUCKING dance anymore E, I can't do anything but drink and try to die, sooner than later.

He crawls under a table, hiding from the beat reverberating in his ears. His hands are trembling and he feels his bladder falter. The floor is even worse, vibrating with the sound of boots hitting pavement. No, no, no, no

Don't take him, don't

It sounds like guns, firing straight to the heart

9 January 2020

Exercise 165

DEVIL'S CLUB - EVENING

COMEDIAN

Welcome everyone. I must admit, this is my first time doing stand up. I'm so proud of the turnout today! Of course, many of you didn't exactly have a choice.

AUDIENCE laughs uncomfortably

COMEDIAN (CONT'D)

I'm here today to talk about good, and evil. How many of you sitting there consider yourselves good people?

A few raised hands from the audience. An old man with an US flag on his snapback and a mother with tears running down her eyes, clutching her newborn and rocking back and forth on her heels. The rest hesitate.

COMEDIAN (CONT'D)

I'd appreciate some fucking honesty from you guys. Pretending to be evil won't make me spare you. But you're right! All of you are bad. Motherfuckers. You kick your dogs, sniff your sister's pants. You don't appreciate FUNNY

jokes. So I'm gonna teach you, we're gonna be here all night, laughing away.
Don't you worry.

16 January 2020

Exercise 62

Mother is seldom the one to wake us up. Before we had to leave home it was Katerina, the nanny, but now it was the new French tutor. I'm quite sure Grandmother would disapprove if she knew a strange man was coming into our bedroom every morning. But grandmother is not here now. I haven't seen Mother for two days, but I've heard her desperate wails through the wall that separates our bedrooms, I've felt her scratch the wallpaper bare with her fingernails.

Today, I asked Father. I was afraid, he doesn't smile much anymore and when I get close, I feel my heart picking up and sweat run down my spine. He would never hit me, but when he screams he goes red and bloated, like the demons Dmitri was always telling me about.

"Because the zarévich is sick." Father's voice was cold and dead.

I've gotten sick three times before, with the fever, and Mother didn't cry.

The blanket feels heavy, thick and humid. I can hear Alexei's ragged breathing beside me, and his hand feels clammy and cold. Olga shakes like a leaf, and her sounds sounds alien and childlike when she screams.

"Mama I don't like it I don't--"

"I know you don't, I know you don't like it but it's more important that you're safe."

I can't see it but I know she was a pistol in her hands. It looks like a toy, small and engraved.

"Dada will protect us, dada will"

23 January 2020

Exercise 117

Ayn went for a walk every morning, after breakfast. Always an hour, smoking and strolling along the coastline. After I found out she was a professor, I expected her to lead a spartan lifestyle, white walls and small grid notebooks in neat, little piles. I'd been surprised to find out she was indulgent, almost hedonistic, in her pleasures. She ate raw honey on toast, eggs and bacon on the side, and had a cigarette after every meal. She'd brought a gramophone with her on the boat, and when she wasn't walking or engaged in her studies, soft crooning music lingered from her room, the door perpetually open.

She'd looked, and said: care to join me? With kind eyes but a cruel smile, and here I found myself, trying not to cough up the smoke as we walked, with a careful distance between us.

You don't talk much, do you. I held my tongue. I'd never really seen the sea like this, calm and rolling, but undeniably powerful. The sea had always meant walking fast, kneeling on sharp stone, bleeding on the water when the shells scratched my fingers, feeling my father's unwavering gaze on my back. To enjoy the breeze, watch the sun reflect on the waves, let my feet fall into step with hers and our hands swing close, it all felt like sin.

Look there. She pointed at a small seagull, brown feathers spotted with black, who was resting on a lone rock ahead. It's a baby, her mother's just left her.

6 February 2020

Exercise 34

He walked fast, white coat flapping insistently between his legs. He looked out of place in the darkness of the docks, crawling with shadowy figures and black smoke. In the edge of his vision, a small fishing boat collided with one of the new *voyagers*, designed to carry tourists across the channel. He walked faster, checking his pocket watch as he swerved, dodging a small mountain of fish sent overboard by another boat, which had flipped over. It would be fine to be just half an hour late, certainly not enough to lose his head, but no more.

The dock lights flickered on and off ominously as he crossed the main gate, narrowly missing an electric cable which had gotten loose and threatened to plunge into the open water, where seafood pickers worked until early morning. He made it into the crowded street, but had no success hauling a steam-cab, and had to jump on one of the passing trains, white gloves slipping on the iron rails. It was undignified for a man of his position, but much better than being executed on a public plaza.

The tram offered a fast ride, if tricky. He didn't look back as he got off, but heard the other passengers gasp as a man's arm helplessly flapped, stuck between the moving doors. He barely noticed the droplets of blood on his white coat as he walked into the courtroom.

6 February 2020

Exercise 115

From as long as I can remember, I've seen Hittero Ave, bustling with guards and the merchants that bring in fresh fish, bread and milk every morning. It's difficult to imagine my brother wearing the bright red uniform of the guards, sitting elegantly amount his bear. He's been posted to the Capital, anyway, so I won't have to see him ever again. My father used to be a guard, too, but now he's frail and crooked, the keys hanging from his belt have bent his hair and greyed his hair, and he can rarely be seen outside the gatehouse now, stuck in the dreamlike space between two worlds that we inhabit.

13 February 2020

Exercise 123

November was a wretched month to arrive in the city. Eva felt the water filter through her leather boots and soak the white cotton underneath, squelching uncomfortably as she

quickened her pace, dragging her wooden trunk behind her. She'd need a room before the sun set, and she was already straying into the suburbs, having been rejected by all inns in the Altstadt. To be homeless, of course, would delay the investigation by several days. She clutched the leather envelope, engraved in gold with her mother's surname. Her inheritance awaited inside, but she'd been instructed not to open it until she found Herr Stefan. Her hands faltered on the seal for a second, before she ripped it open.

IV. Book Response

The River Gods – Brian Kiteley

OCTOBER, 2005

LUZ ALVARIÑO GABEIRAS, 8

FRAGAS DO EUME, BERMUI

I'm following behind my uncle, feeling the path get narrower and the thick trees close over our heads. We're far from the eucalyptus fields now, and the forest gets indomitable and hard to transit. Carlos takes my hand, which looks small and white in comparison to his brown fingers, covered in black ink, and traces a circle in my palm. He says: *You can never take seeds from them*. I know that the fae are dangerous, they speak in half truths and trickery. You can never take their presents, you must say thank you when you leave. We draw signs in the sand with sandalwood sticks. We're near the entrance now, signalled by two metal poles painted red with flaking paint. I know he will leave tomorrow. Grandma says he's a pirate. I ask him if he is, but he just laughs, and reaches in his pocket for the leather pouch of tobacco.

JANUARY, 1974

M^a JOSÉ GABEIRAS CASTRO, 15

AS PONTES DE GARCÍA RODRÍGUEZ

I hear my mother's voice, urging us to finish our breakfast and not be late for school. I manage to drag my legs out of bed, and find that my white night gown has ridden up to my chest during the night. The morning is cold and harsh, but I still open the doors to the glazed gallery, looking down at the foggy and deserted street. The bed next to mine is empty, I can hear my sister running down the stairs, hoping to grab the first hot chocolate. I know the bread will be hard and moldy when I come down, and the chocolate watered down, so I don't bother. We grab our books and thick woolen coats and wait for our neighbor Elena, who lives four houses down from us, and my friend Reme. Reme's mom is mad, she only eats fried eggs with chips. We will pick up Rosi, the banker's daughter, and make our way. Every morning, I tell them what I've dreamt, picking up from the day before, like serials published in the paper. Ubaldo is waiting at the school, as he's done for every day of his life, opening and closing up the heavy iron gates. No. Luis, his name is Luis, and he's also the cinema doorman.

AUGUST, 1937

NAME UNREADABLE, 42

LA HABANA, CUBA

My dear,

I'm sorry. I am smoking too much since I'm in Cuba, cigarrillos and some cigars if I can get them. The streets are always crowded, and their names are far too long. Now I'm sitting in a café in la Avenida 9 de Julio, ~~what a lousy name for a street~~. Here they have a small train which runs through the city, in the middle of the street, alongside cars and men. And all the men wear hats, because the sun is heavy and you can burn easily. I have a small group of fellow expatriates I can trust enough to drink with, now, a few nights a week. There's a few gallegos here too, and we talk of the agrarians and the republicans and the guerrillas, but I haven't told them who I am. Some of them are here for work, some of them are *huidos*, like me. Here lives also a man that works in a boat, and he says he will go to Coruña very soon. I thought of giving him this letter, hoping that for once my words would reach you. There's no bigger respite for me than to imagine you reading my words, although in my dreams you weep and I know you would not cry. You would hold Luz very close, tell her that her father is alive and that she must be strong. That he loves and misses her much. I know they will come for you. ~~I know better than to insult you and tell you not to speak~~. I only say to you, if you must, go out on your feet, with your fist raised. These days, I feel like a cowardly dog for leaving you behind, and often ~~think of dying at your side~~.

~~Yours,~~

JULY 20, 1969

ALVARO ALVARIÑO PRIMO, 6

AEROPUERTO INTERNACIONAL SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, VENEZUELA

I'm watching a plane take flight from the airport windows. My brother is sitting on the floor, gripping a huge radio. He's listening to a man speaking in a grave voice, about the moon and

some men trying to get to it, which to me seems very difficult. We will also fly soon, going back home, we've heard about the animals, and the house. Mom says Spain is our home, even though I've never seen it. In Spain there'll be cows and a big dog, and mom says we'll have a room for ourselves. We'll also see cousin Elisa, when we stop in Madrid.