

# A Final Dream

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She lies with God tonight; I wish she'd lie with me. It feels weird, doesn't it? To look over at a person when you're lying down next to them. So close, yet also a geometric lifetime away; two parallel lines destined never to meet. Or rather, never to meet again.

God, I'm drunk. I'm drunk. I'm so drunk and it's dark outside. It's so dark I can barely see the outline of her face anymore. So cold I can almost picture her breaths turning to vapor as they leave her purple lips. 'Don't fall asleep,' they mouth soundlessly. My eyelids feel like tungsten weights. My body is quaking to fend off the cold; or is it just my nerves?

I want so badly to stay – only to stay. To stay here, with her, but letting myself fall asleep drunk and alone on this damp grass in this cold, that could be the end of me. Bye bye forever.

I'm not entirely alone though, I suppose. The blue moon watches over me. Her coterie of stars heckle me or cheer me on from the peanut gallery. And then of course there's you isn't there? The silent watcher. Always there. Always watching, churning, judging. Always, always, always.

The stars and the moon are not being very generous with their light tonight, but they sure are chatty. 'Oh please, please, please sir, won't you sing us a song or tell us a story?' Some of the younger asters squeak. 'Oh yes, a story, a story, please a story!' More of them begin to chime in. 'Quiet! Leave the nice gentleman and his... his lady friend be!' The moon hisses with motherly scorn. It isn't very effective.

A story? A story. I suppose I could, even in this state, manage a story. It might be a good way of staying awake in this cold, extend the last few moments I have with her. But what story should I tell? I turn to look at her, though I know there isn't a chance in hell she'd ever answer *that* question. Touchlessly, I still feel her presence. I imagine the infinitesimal lilting of her thin rib cage, her tiny wrists lying on her chest. Small fragile stigmatized wrists.

She's as pretty as the day I met her. *Which was when exactly?*

The first time I ever saw her, I was drinking alone at that midnight college bar, a feeble institution for all students, prospective engineers and failing poets, alike. She was an engineer.

My eyes set on her, in the dim light, as she took a famished drag from a dying cigarette butt. I wondered long and hard whether I would try to talk to her, whether I had the balls, whether I could face that kind of rejection. Would she even pretend I had a chance, or would she stop me before I even started. Would she let me off easy, or would she revel in the moment. I wondered whether her friends would laugh at me. Whether she'd awkwardly try to get them to stop, or whether she'd join in. Whether she'd give it to me straight, or rather tell me a lie, and whether it would be a good one at that or if she'd tell me she had a boyfriend already. But in the end, it was she instead who approached me. She asked me how long I planned on staring at her from across the bar. I wanted to tell her I loved her; I asked her her name.

I've been told I'm good at reading people. Some call that being perceptive; others call it being judgemental. What had she offered up for me to read? Quite a lot actually. A lot of data, but it was all in a language I couldn't fully understand. A language I'd once known but since forgotten. Entrancing, is what it was, what *she* was. An enigma, a puzzle, beckoning, bleating, begging to be solved. That navy dress of hers, tattered on account of having been relentlessly run through cheap university washing machines, now too tight in some places, too loose in others. Did she realize the charm those strands of lint lying severed on her neck lent? Her beautiful, beaten eyes painted over with cheap make-up. Did she know how captivating it was to watch her black eyelids crinkle like volcanic sand dunes each time she blinked? Is that why she blinked so slowly? With such purpose? She rolled her own cigarettes; was it because she liked the way it made her red fingertips turn yellow?

We talked late into the night. She told me about herself, about the music she liked. About the food she cooked, and then the food she ate. She told me about mechanics and about her classes. About sines and cosines. About her mother, her sister, and her dog. About her research, and all the wonderful things she'd done. Then, she looked at me in silence awaiting my response. What had I done? So I talked about the pictures I dreamed of one day painting: decadence personified jousting an elated tumor-ridden pervert, a nation burning while Church and State engage in cordial colloquy, a dilapidated parthenon etched with acid needles onto aging celluloid. She laughed and told me she liked the words I used. I told her I liked her smile.

I saw her the week after, at the same spot, at the same time. She wore a worn white blouse that night and the mark on her bird neck which had previously been an infinitesimal mark – a faded love bite – was now fully gone. When I said hi, she said she'd missed me, but only a little bit. She took a drag of a cigarette she'd rolled. A jet of smoke ejected from her lips and flew up my nose. She'd rolled it with lavender.

This time, she asked me about my fears. I told her about prions, priapism, and paralysis. She told me that she feared war and disease, that she feared the rising seas and a world in which people were only equal to their inequity. But she also told me she had nightmares about being put in a box, of bugs crawling out of her big eyes, that she also feared being alone, she feared pain, and she feared betrayal.

She told me she dreamed of making the world a better place. I had not the heart to tell her I dreamt of Scottish Highlands and of golden cocks and cunts swinging from side to side in the wind. She smiled sadly and told me about her father, about a fractured childhood and about a broken home. I said nothing at all. She asked me if I was going to hurt her. I told her I was toothless, clawless. She gave me a look which said ‘toothless, clawless, yet full of charm.’ I got her number and walked back home alone.

When you're lonely and alone, there are desert spaces in your mind you can go to. It isn't easy. ‘Not for the faint-hearted,’ the armchair explorers of the gilded age would have said, while enjoying cognac and cigars in their firelit studies, stroking their long white beards with velvet gloves. These desert spaces are far, and the pilgrimage there is arduous. Beyond blizzards, beyond memories, beyond fiery rock, hypothetical scenarios, and even the void of absolute clarity. Once you've marched, crawled, pushed you way beyond, then and only then, you may begin to sink.

The spaces I talk about are deep, deep within the crevasses of the mind. Deeper than the underground speakeasy bars where anorexic mothers cavort with eighteen-year-old draftees the night before deployment. Deeper than the dark narrow caverns where only extremophilic thoughts can survive by feeding on microbiotic idea fragments.

Slowly but surely, I sink to this desolate lower mantle of my mind. Powering thoughtlessly through thick molasses gloom. Down here, the air is wet with incandescent mirk. My nostrils are filled with the sulphuric stench of decaying neural pathways rotting away in distant catacombs. When my limbs once again touch solid ground, I begin to march onwards still. The shallow cobblestone paths I follow – built by the archaic embryonic architects of my childhood – become warmer and warmer as the space between them and the molten core beneath thins out gradually.

In an alleyway of relatively lighter obscurity, I meet a young couple. The gentleman is called Innocent, and the woman, Desire. Slowly, they dance. His flashy but faded garments tell an all too familiar story of familial duty and illicit yearning. Of ardent romance and of rapturous rebellion. Of a galvanized son defying his father's will, for the irresistible sanctity of his chambermaid's smile. Of a broken betrothal and of elated elopement. But also of a man's fall from grace into regret. Of a once warming embrace losing its appeal. Of an impoverished gentleman pushed to infidelity by feelings of inadequacy. Of the paralyzing guilt that turns such a traitor into a tottering child as his wife slams a feeble wooden door behind her, and of the sinister depths he then frequents in an attempt to rekindle lost appetites. Desire meanwhile, wears hardly anything at all.

Who brought these two to twirl in the darkness before my eyes – this tumultuous, convulsive dance? Was it cold imagination, floating in through the bathroom window of my ear to lay eggs in the folds of my brain; to cause an eclosion of cockroaches and butterflies to fill my skull? Was it my love starved heart, anemic, atrophic; a hierophant, whimpering, preaching, blabbering sycophantic sedatives to comfort my hungry body? Was it archangel Solitude: always above, never before – guiding, seeking, stalking from behind my shoulder's shadow? 'I brought them here to tell tales of want and wanton longing. I brought them to you to testify how this predicament is not yours to bear alone. I ordered them to scorch your soul out of submission, to blanch the sticky skin binding your blinding eyelids shut, and now I order you to wake.'

Awake.

Not good. I let myself fall asleep. Not good at all. Isn't the cold supposed to sober you up? Humans weren't made to withstand such temperatures. I can hardly feel my fingers. *Stick them in your mouth.* They taste so salty; what salty fingers I have tonight. It's actually a pretty effective measure. Now what about my toes?

Even now, when she's barely even with me, not really even with me, not with me at all, it's still so hard to say goodbye to her. What do you call that, when someone is practically impossible to physically leave, emotionally leave, their memory – or rather, your memories of them – impossible to suppress; even when you know how much you're hurting them? How much they're hurting you? When they're like a magnet, like a planet bending spacetime, creating their own gravitational field. Her? She's not a planet, she's a damn red giant.

For our first official date, we'd gone on a night time hike. Hell, there's no point in hiding it, we'd gone stargazing and it was on this very hill. I'm kind of surprised the moon and the stars didn't seem to remember us – though I guess they see couples up here all the time. It had been much less cold back then, we'd worn warmer clothes, and I was much more sober.

"You do this often?" She'd asked, towards the end of the night.

"Honestly, this was my first time. Do you?"

"Nope. I don't know why I don't, though. I'm having a great time."

"Yeah me too."

We sat in silence for a long time after that. Not a bad kind of silence though, not awkward. Comfortable silence. Silence that tells the other person you're satisfied. Satisfied to just lay there for a while. Satisfied to look at the moon, at the stars. Satisfied to wordlessly communicate with them for a bit – kind of like you and I right now, unilaterally at least. There was some noise, of course. Sometimes we shifted positions a bit. I'd apologize for accidentally pulling her hair trying to put my arm in a more comfortable place, she'd apologize for it blowing into my mouth, but by and large silence. The kind of

silence that makes it impossible to leave. The kind of silence that makes you realize how much you'll miss them tomorrow, and it locks your legs in place.

Stuck in the mud. That's how I feel right now. A drunk sack of shit that couldn't move even if his life depended on it. Getting up feels like an impossible task. *Any suggestions?* Even if I did get up now, I wouldn't really know which way to go. Straight downhill (though I doubt I could walk in a very straight line right now). And then what? It's such a long walk back to my dorm, such a long and painful walk. I wish my feet were as numb as my face, then it would be more bearable. My poor poor numb face, beaten, battered, whacked by the cold, sedated only by even colder alcohol. *Now would be a good time to get smacked in the face. You wouldn't feel a thing.*

"You know," she had said as she bit into her breakfast sandwich on a Sunday where we had gone out to brunch, "I watched a video the other day about a guy who punched another guy, and it killed him." She grabbed a napkin to wipe off the runny egg which had oozed onto her face. "Can you imagine? Just one punch, and poof. He's out. You're a murderer. You ever been punched?" She offered me a bite of her sandwich in hopes that I'd let her try my pancakes.

"Nope, never." I said, plopping a piece with a lot of maple syrup onto her little plate.

"What? No way, seriously?"

"Never been in a fight."

"How's that even possible?"

"I mean, I don't know, is it that common?"

"I'd say it is?"

"You been in a lot of fights?"

"No, but it's not the same," she said with a smile.

"I could fix that for you if you want? I know a guy, said he'll fight anyone for 20 bucks."

"Only 20? Pfft! He doesn't stand a chance!"

“Well maybe he could just punch you, and you don’t fight back.”

“Nuh-uh, if he’s punching anyone it’s you! Like that, you finally won’t have to go around telling people you’ve never been punched before.”

“Careful… someone was telling me about a guy who died from just one punch.”

“Very funny. He died because his head hit the floor too hard, smartass. When this guy punches you, I’ll make sure you’re landing on a soft surface.”

“You’re so considerate”

“Well I wouldn’t want your pretty face to get all bruised up now would I.”

Oh my poor pretty face, if only she could see it now. I wonder how she’d feel. I wish you could feel it, this guilty pain, this painful cold. I wish you could feel all of it, that you could be more in the loop. I really do. I’m trying my best, is it working at all? Can you feel my heart beating against my chest? My chest beating down on my heart? My mind pulsating, nauseating? Nothing? Anything?

She could feel it, or at least she made me believe she could. How many hours did we spend just talking to each other? Real conversations. Really, really, real conversations. Conversations about things you’ve never told anyone before, about things you didn’t even know you knew. The kinds of conversations that make you want to tell the other person that you never realized how much you needed them in your life until just now.

“Do you mean that? Is that really true?” She’d asked one afternoon when we were laying down, cramped on her twin bed.

“I… I think I do” I’d replied as earnestly as I could.

She gave me that now familiar look with her big black eyes and little smile, that ‘cut the crap’ look that stared right into my soul.

“What do you mean ‘I think,’ ” she said, mimicking my voice at the end. “Either it’s true, or it isn’t. And of all times to say it, why did you say it then?”

For context, we'd just been talking about what extinct animals we would be willing to eat.

I shrugged, but she wasn't satisfied.

"True, as in 'If True, then not False. If False, then not True?'" She added in my voice again.

"If True, then not False. If False, then not True..." I repeated. " Maybe True, maybe False, maybe True and False?" I chanted. " Maybe, if True, then not True. If then, then then. If not then then when?"

She hit my head softly with a pillow, and when I opened my eyes, there was that look again.

I wonder if she's got that look on her face now. If in her mind, she ever still looks at me like that. If she believes me, or if she would believe me now. Would she think it's an act? This drunken misery I'm in. Would she think to herself she can see through it?

It's so dark I can't even see my trembling hand as I wave it in front of my eyes. So dark I feel like I'm at the bottom of the sea, breathing in icy sea water where ancient shriveled leviathans go to die.

Looking back now, my drunk ass damp with wet grass and toes burning like they're gonna burst off, it feels like it was all maybe a bit much? A little heavy, a little rash, a little dense. She said things she probably didn't fully mean, I'm not the first person to be called names, not the first person to make someone cry, and I'm definitely not the last.

I don't know what exactly you're thinking and I never will, but, in my defense, I think there are some things you should consider first. Consider the fact that I'm still young. Consider the fact that she was unique, and consider the fact that before her I was so alone. So, so, alone. Not the good kind of alone, not the little whistling gnome strolling through the sunny clearing with a mushroom hat and a bundle on his shoulder kind of alone. I was the bad version, the dark underbelly of alone. The alone with green eyes, a big salivating tongue and sharp fangs that old Babushkas warn the little kids playing in the village square about. The kind of alone that made pirates jump overboard into the deep blue unknown. The kind of alone they train cosmonauts for. The kind that makes you go a little bananas, that sends your mind flying, spiraling away. That makes you want to cry and scream. The kind of alone that makes you want to put on a black shirt and smash some fucking windows. The kind of alone that makes you hike up to a

nostalgic spot with a bottle of cheap bourbon and try to drink yourself to death. To torture yourself with memories of guilt and regret. Try to drink yourself to salvation. Drink yourself all the way up to God and tell her you're so so so sorry.

“Scenario:” she’d begun once, between hefty scoops of ice cream, in that customary manner she’d recently adopted before announcing a hypothetical she wanted me to consider. “You wake up tomorrow and everyone on earth thinks you’re a prophet with a unique and direct hotline to the big guy in the sky, what ten commandments are you giving them?”

“What the fuck are you talking about,” I laughed.

“Come on! I always answer your stupid questions!” She protested, licking a streak of vanilla off her top lip.

“I don’t even know what the actual ten commandments are, since when did you become religious?”

“I’m not, and honestly, I’m pretty surprised *you* don’t, seems like the kind of thing you’d know. ‘Thou shall not kill?’ You ever heard of that one? ”

“I mean, yeah, I guess I know some of them. And it’s ‘shalt,’ by the way,” I corrected, embarrassed.

“Exactly, now answer the question,” she said, while taking a massive spoonful of chocolate out of my bowl, smiling that her bait had worked.

“Okay, well that one seems like a good place to start. Maybe no stealing either? No torture, no rape, no war, or actually no violence, no polluting, no racism, sexism, just no discrimination in general, no hoarding wealth, no spreading fake news, and I don’t know, just be a good person. Is that ten yet?”

“What about other stuff,” she asked in a more serious tone.

“What do you mean other stuff,” I said, taking a spoonful back from her bowl.

“I don’t know, like adultery?”

"I mean, cheating is bad, but I don't think it's in the top ten worst things you could do! When did humans become monogamous? Hell, when marriage was invented people probably died at like twenty years old anyways. Monogamy will probably go out of fashion by the time our great grandchildren are alive. If people start living into their hundreds consistently, no shot they're spending a majority of that time with just one person!"

She'd smiled when I said that. She'd grabbed my hand and smiled a toothless smile.

I'm so tired. Jaded, drunk, and tired. Tired of being judged, tired of the guilt. Tired of the cold. Tired of being tired. Tired of fighting off sleep, of fighting to keep my eyes open. I'm tired of the memories. The haunting haunting memories. The memories of her, the memories of today, the memories of now. Tired of asking myself the same question over and over. *Can you truly love someone and still hurt them?*

It reminds me of an old folktale that lives now only in the yellow pages of a dusty book buried in a forgotten corner of my mind. I'd like to tell you about it. I think the stars'll appreciate this one too.

Long, long, long ago, on the outskirts of a little Slovak village deep in the Carpathian mountains, there was a little shepherdess who wanted nothing more than to be in love! She lived in a small cottage with her grandmother, and despite her longing, was forbidden by Grandmother from ever going down to the village and meeting young men of her age. Though she protested often, Grandmother never faltered. You see, Grandmother knew something the little shepherdess did not! The little shepherdess had been born allergic to love. It was a rare and cruel ailment. Even crueler than the winters which had winnowed the shepherdess's family and possessions down to just Grandmother, their cottage, and their herd! This is why, despite the ceaseless begging and crying, Grandmother had never allowed the young shepherdess to venture down to the village. The villagers knew nothing of this of course, and over time grew ever skeptical of the reclusive grandmother and the pretty little shepherdess they only ever got glimpses of from afar.

One day, upon the arrival of the shepherdess's eighteenth summer, Grandmother fell very ill! Bed-ridden for weeks, the young shepherdess grew scared and pleaded for Grandmother's permission to go down to the village to fetch medicine. When Grandmother gave in, she accepted on the condition that the shepherdess promised not to speak to any man other than the old apothecary. She told the young shepherdess of her condition 'love allergies are rare, but can be incredibly dangerous. You mustn't fall in love my dear, for my own sake! Who will take care of me if you fall in love?' As a precaution, the little shepherdess was to wear horse blinders – those pads that make it so that horses can only see what's directly in front of them. And so she did, she walked diligently down to the village, making sure to stare only at the ground ahead of her the entire way. In the main square, the men of the village, surprised to finally be seeing the beautiful shepherdess up close, called out to her, cried out for her attention, but her gaze remained fixed on her forward marching feet, and, her vision obstructed, she could not see the men's faces and thus could not fall in love.

When she finally made it to the apothecary, the man was charming, but far too old to stir any passions within her fragile little heart. Time had turned his face wrinkly, and shriveled his knees so much so that he could not stand up on his own. She recounted her grandmother's symptoms and the experienced apothecary knew exactly what she needed. He proclaimed she needed a simple treatment of herbs and roots, but when he asked his apprentice to fetch the ingredients, the nervous young man knocked over the glass container holding Wormwood seeds. The crash startled the young shepherdess who looked up instinctively to find the young apprentice's guilt ridden face. Before she could look away, close her eyes, forget what she had seen and run back to Grandmother with her tail between her legs, she fell in love and it was too late.

Our little shepherdess was surprised. Surprised by how quickly this feeling she instantly recognized as love settled in. She was surprised by how effortless it was. How easy her heart warmed up, melted, like sweet butter. Most of all, she was surprised by how good it felt. How could she be allergic to something which felt so good? Had Grandmother's fears been for nothing after all?

She brought the medicine back home to Grandmother and swore she had not spoken to any man beside the old apothecary. But those seeds of love which had begun to germinate within her body pushed ever more deeply on her heartstrings. Irrepressible desire set in. As fate would have it, she ventured out that night back into the village which was alight with solstice festivities, and there was music in the village square. There, she found the apothecary's apprentice dancing with the other villagers. She approached him, and they danced together all night. His hands were so warm, his smile so entrancing. She loved him and loved that she loved him and that he loved her. As they parted, he kissed her on the forehead.

When she woke up the next morning, she felt a heat exuding from her scalp. She made her way to the nearest mirror, and was shocked to find a hive had developed on the spot where her lover's lips had met her pale skin. A bright red rash in the perfect shape of a heart. Was this thus the symptom of her affliction? She had never seen such a rash, and though its appearance came to her as a sharp surprise, she could not deny that the mark was inherently beautiful. She ran her finger around the outline of the red rash. The warm flesh her fingers traced burnt almost as brightly as the passion she felt inside her towards this young man. This was a trinket, a testament of the love they had for each other! How absurd for Grandmother to deprive her of this joy she had wanted for her entire life. This love was pure ecstasy and if its price was a patch of red skin, which despite being itchy was also beautiful, it was a price well worth paying! She attended her duties for the rest of the day, making sure to hide the red heart on her forehead from Grandmother. Despite the cold water she ran over it and the ointments she rubbed in, the irritated skin did not seem to set. It stood a timeless testament to her beautiful and true love, and she was all the more grateful for it.

That night she went back down to the village and found the young man in the square. She blushed when he kissed her fingers. Her white knuckles were in turn branded with another bright red heart. They danced with more passion than they had the night before, their heartstrings intertwining to sow an increasingly sublime tapestry. And when the revelry was over, the music stopped, they found themselves alone staring at each other in a state of pure, rapturous bliss. He brushed a strand of brown hair off her

forehead and kissed her lips. Another heart appeared making her lips all the redder. She brought the young man back to her cottage.

When he woke up next to her the following morning, he was horrified to find her swollen red carcass, barely breathing, lying in bed next to him. He ran back to the village, and though his intentions had not been malicious, he sparked a panic among the villagers who mobbed the small cottage and burnt the young shepherdess at the stake for being a witch. Grandmother died the following week of a broken heart.

This story, it comes back to me so vividly now, though I can't quite pinpoint where I first heard it.

Perhaps it's a memory from another life, perhaps it was a dream I had when I was a young child, or perhaps it was a lullaby my grandmother sang me to sleep with once or twice.

Are you judging me yet? Did you like that little story? Has the dust settled, the doubt settled in. Is this picture now beginning to make sense – or, more sense? You're about to judge me a whole lot more. But before you do so, for just a moment, do me this one favor. Suppose you were you, but that you were also a little rat, a little mouse, scurrying on the floor of a fine Parisian establishment. A hungry little pest, bullied by your larger siblings. Always, always bullied and judged. They get to sleep on the largest bunks, snuggle against the warmest spot of mother's belly, and of course, they get the lion's share of the communal cheese. Each night, and I really do mean every single night of your life, you sit there, tummy rumbling, looking up from your peephole at the customers. They eat escargot lathered in green garlic butter. They eat aged prime rib with crispy yellow fat, and they stuff oily fingers clutching bundles of fresh French Fries against their smacking wet lips. The scents are divine. They belch and they burp, they pat their stomachs and complain that the duck – which the chef is renowned for – was not on the menu tonight or lament the fact that frog legs are not in season. For just one moment, suppose all this. Suppose you were real. Suppose the world was an oyster, and suppose you could fly. Suppose you'd drank from

life's salty broth, and it tasted divine, or that it tasted like shit. Does it even matter? If you were given a chance to have a slurp from another soup, wouldn't you give it a try?

"Tell me the truth," she'd said with a shaky voice. That fateful, frightfully inevitable night. That she, – my version of 'she,' the 'she' that belonged to me – died.

The truth. Which truth did she want? The true truth. The sinister, ugly painful truth. The nail ripping truth that I thought I'd fallen in love with a girl that didn't exist. The truth that I cheated on her with someone else, just once, when I was drunk. So, so, so drunk. The truth that she cried so much when I told her, that she said she hated me. That I was a drunk piece of shit. The truth that no matter what I said, it would only make it worse. And that she dumped my sorry ass right after.

But there's more, oh so much more, truth to this story. The ultimate truth that I only realized how much I loved her when she left me. The truth that settled in as she walked away, that she may have been the last, the only one, to truly love me. The truth that I couldn't tell you the name of the other girl with a gun pointed at my head. The truth that I regret it all. The truth that like the man who became a killer with just one punch, I too became one with just one kiss. The truth that the second she slammed that door, that familiar old bastard Solitude strutted right back into my life! The truth that I'm back to being so alone. So alone, that the only people I have left to talk to are the moon, the stars, and you. The truth that I deserve to be alone, and the truth that no matter what I do, no matter how much I beg, I won't be worthy of her sympathy, or yours.

And here we are now, you and I. Cheap bourbon flowing through my veins as I imagine you imagining me freezing to death alone on this nostalgic hill, imagining the girl I loved lying next to me as she did once long ago. Torturing myself with cold and cold memories. Crucifying myself with questions and stories of shepherdesses. *Do I deserve to move on?*

My limbs are so stiff and in so much pain. I feel I couldn't even move them if I tried. They say there's no feeling worse than regret, and I regret so much. Sharp regret, carving, clawing at my organs from within. Bubonic regret turning my nails black and making my teeth fall out. Nuclear regret, poisoning my guts. Desert, desolate regret that puts me to sleep, euthanizes my being. Is this what's making it so hard to leave? Is this her revenge? Her justice? Is this my penance?

Or rather, is this her olive branch, her final gift? Is she trying to save me the pain? The shame of having to look myself in the eye. To have to live through, suffer through, the consequences of my actions? To have to reckon with my failure. Is it unethical to let myself stay out here by her side? For just one more minute, to let myself sleep while you, the moon, and the stars watch over me? Give myself the luxury, the sweet release of drunken sleep?

'Not quite.' I manage to whisper. Battered, bruised, but breathing.

These thoughts, they usher me to sing a final question:

*Have you forgotten you exist?* Because you do. You exist within a dying God's melting fever dream. You exist in a placid membrane of guilt rapidly falling apart. You exist among the arctic remains of a sinking Russian warship. In the dwindling worship of a forgotten pantheon. You exist in the last minutes of a play you already know the ending to. In the final note of a song awaiting to be interrupted by applause. You are a divine creation devised as a transcendental coping mechanism. You exist to unwillingly help your creator reckon with what he's done! All are well who have forgotten, and you exist as caregiver to hold my trembling hand as I forget about it all, as I forget about her, and forget about you. You exist to serve this duty and you served it well. I thank you!