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Five P.M. in a Perfect World

An apricot gleam spreads down the surface of the water, streaming out of the afternoon sky. A boy sits on a bench on the shoreline, shadowed by brush rooted in the bank. Skyscrapers erupt, windows scintillating, from behind a picturesque hill of sloped fields and bare copses. Reeds hang from the shallows. Mud slips polished down into the liquid. Ducks rest on the glimmering lake. Yellow and white checkered sneakers compress the rejuvenating grass. Everything is still. Everything is moving.

*Even though I know I have only fifteen minutes to sit here, I can't imagine a more perfect situation. Just enough time to take it all in, to enjoy the whole scene, without growing bored, tired, distracted, removing my slab of shapes and colours and sounds from its holster of cotton and returning to a place where time moves four times as fast, is worth half as much. Yes, what a happy accident, how everything seems to perfectly fall into place.*

Behind the boy, passersby converse along the footpath, cyclists zip around the curve, children tear about the field, motors roar down the highway, commuters whiz down the road, nothing is still, everything is moving.

*It's all passing me by. I'm left here, stranded, on this bench. All it took was falling behind just a little, wasting time here in this perfect world, where time slows to a crawl, where significance bombards me. I will fade out of this world. I will be left behind.*

The glow warms the lake, warms the mud, warms the wildlife, warms the hairs on the arms of the boy on the bench. The gleam touches the liquid, dapples the earth, outlines the branches, bleaches the wood of the bench around the boy. The heavens seem to grow tired of obscuring the pitch, their expanse of azure subtly fading, their heartening ball of energy leaving for bluer skies. No cloud dares intrude upon this celestial departure. The shadows become equal to their casters.

*What a happy fucking accident indeed. Such a perfect stretch of time has fallen into my lap. I don't need to take photos, no, not I, I should sit here, romantically basking in the memorability of it all. After all, I have no need for digital facsimiles of my own memories, I am above that, past that, beyond that, older than that, I live in the moment, I tell myself.*

The buildings are crafted, tip to tail, from a mosaic pattern of windows and steel, a mesh of architecture and innovation and technology and bustle. They invade the cornflower domain of the empyrean, scraping tiny paths of brilliant metallics out of the vividly painted dome. At their bases, or even higher up their lengths, they disappear into the thicket, steel and glass replaced for branches and needles. The dense, evergreen forest ends abruptly in a field of resplendent green blades, interrupted only occasionally by the gatherings of leafless deciduous, still huddled together from the frost of weeks before, still extending their frail appendages toward the sunbeams, still bushy, gaunt, brief breaks in the sloping emerald. The hill crashes into the shoreline, a patch of trees springing up as if spray from the splash of entry, mud and grass rolling in turbulence down into the lustrous cerulean.

*I am the only one sitting on this bench. This bench, dedicated to an old, deceased couple, the husband was eleven years her senior, I guess that wasn't so out of the*

*ordinary back then, at least they left this bench. They don't exist, they exist still as this bench, I am still, on this bench, I don't exist, I am still and everyone else is moving and I don't exist, they have left me behind, I have left myself here. I have left myself to be abandoned, that must be it. I have become old and wealthy and dead and a bench.*

Ripples, tiny undulations in the gleam, billow out from the mallards' steady patrol about the shallows. The textured mirror reflects mottled figures, and every so often the reflected bird will duck headlong into itself, leaving behind only a tail, its carrot-stick legs gripping the lake's surface, creases of motion spreading away. The water seals the land's dip, blanketing with reflection, glistening, giving nothing of its depths away. The coruscant sheen divides the lake's cross-section of sky into two cobalt halves, extending out into the mud-lined expanses of the water. Not even the shallowest depths reveal themselves in the sharp, angled light. Logs breach, their heads aimed wistfully toward their splintered, softened stumps, their backs gleaming with a slippery veneer, their doubles suspended beneath them in the glass.

*Look at me, enjoying it all, gloating in the glow, the gleam, whatever. I don't deserve even a passing glance. I am just the same as everyone else, no, I am different, I am here on this bench, in this scene. I don't need to take photos. I will keep all of it in my head. In my head, so different from everyone else, see, I don't need them, I am my own perfect world. Everything falls into place for me, everything just works out, after all look at how perfect my world is, look how fucking perfect. I must be so happy, I don't need—*

*I watch a girl scare the ducks away. She walks over to them, she makes some noise, she watches them flap off. She returns to the footpath. Leaves.*

Tufts of golden green sprout from the foundation of mud, clumped together, avid, reaching. Brown lustre lights up the earth as it moistens, the lake drawing it in. Twigs, leaves, and more pepper the springy ground, forming a monochrome brown collage of shapes and textures. Spike-braided branch-ends from cedars lie alongside down feathers and decomposing, thin-as-paper leaves line the area. From beyond the leaves, a tangle of branching, skyward-bound brush screens the water's glisten, shelters the leaves from life-giving rays, streaks the grass and mud with thin, diffuse shadows. Patches of khaki reeds spring forth from the liquid, stiff and vertical as they hollow out to abrupt cessation, their reflections rippled mutations of their posture. Broader expanses of coarse, diminutive grass extend toward the foliage, unprepared to capitalize on the end of frosty, dead mornings, taken aback by the shift from snow to sunbeams.

*I have but five minutes left here. It's just enough time. Isn't it funny how it always seems to go that way? I marvel at how much I needed this, I tell myself I'm working toward a new me, a perfect me, who sits in nature, appreciates everything, allows himself to be lost in the endlessness. I don't take photos. Logically, I am perfectly happy. How could I be anything else?*

A sable pair of tiny, clawed, ringed feet make their way between the clumps of grass. Little sets of four lines, segmented, connected at a point, are imprinted in the wake of its footfalls. Stumps of charcoal hair join the spindly legs to the body. Feathers emanate like scales of tar from the shape, dull and greasy, tattered and serrated. At the tail, long, uneven, scooping tail-feathers protrude at harsh angles. The wings are tucked over it, scaling down into similar points, layered with gloss. The head is covered in coarse hairy tufts. The eyes are dark, darker than anything. Their gleam belies a sense of emptiness. The beak, long and tapered, is buried in the drying mud.

*I watch the crow pick its way across the mud. What an unremarkable, grating bird. It's only a few centimetres from my foot. It has no regard for anything or anyone. It is the only thing that exists, to me. I have to take photos of this. I finally take my phone out of my pocket. I can't believe I wasn't going to take pictures of any of this. Why did I come here, anyways?*

*I came to feel. I was feeling nothing, hadn't been feeling anything, nothing had made me feel anything. I was trapped, frozen in my bed, feeling nothing, wanting nothing. I came all the way here and still I feel nothing. I am still, on the bench, still on the bench, taking in all of it and feeling nothing. I think I should feel relief as I gaze into the afternoon sky. I think I should feel awe as I trace the skyline, or at least a sense of irony seeing the buildings clash with the hills. I think I should feel calm wash over me as I watch the shallow water. I think I should feel grateful that everything has fallen into place, that I am a part of this perfect world, that I am singular, perfect, present,*

A boy sits on a bench in a city park by a lake. Despite the scenery, he stares blankly, as if not quite understanding the meaning in what he sees. People's gazes pass right over him. He doesn't matter at all. The same as everyone else.

*Everything I seem to do is so fucking contrived. I am far away from this body, after all, conducting it into these ridiculous situations, where everything works out just perfectly, where I ought to be feeling all of it.*

*Someday soon, I'll come back from whatever distant place I'm stuck in.*

*So I take some photos for later.*

A boy stands up from a bench, puts on his helmet, pedals away.