

## Morning Raga

1.

Threaded seed to wonder.

Break the landscape at the window.

White paint peeling against the cerulean sky.

What did Alexander call it. *Wabi-sabi*.

He doesn't know what it means. It doesn't matter.

Metal murk and thunder.

*And have you forgotten last winter when you stopped eating.*

Still shifting in his seat, refusing to get out of the cab.

The surface of the black river still.

The surface of his face in the rear-view mirror ash-filled still.

As the cab pulled up to the curb Quinn watched the woman standing on the corner at the cross-walk, her eyes closed her arms out either for balance or to catch some vibe from the air.

"I need new instructions," Priti had told Dimitra that morning. "I need to give up my old habits."

Walking into traffic for one thing. Following birds that led her away from her destination for another.

"The cars are the same as me," she whispered. "The street is the same as me. I am the same as me..."

Quinn kept watching. Her lips were moving but she didn't step off the curb.

2.

Memories lived as if in another life.

Quinn unpacking.

But it isn't about that, it's about leaving and Quinn does it best: always leaving something behind or taking something that doesn't belong to him, always arriving underfed in clothes that don't fit, with a scissors in the kitchen haircut.

"Once when we were living in New Orleans," he said to Alexander, "my hair matted into dreadlocks and I used to stick small things in it. Pencils, bus tickets. A glass pipe."

"You can make a story out of anything," Alexander said, tracing letters onto the glass table top.

Quinn leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "You are writing in gin on a table. You are the storyteller, not me. I collect trash. That's all. It's not very interesting."

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Dimitra decided that Darwish was wrong, that you *could* draw the war on the walls of a city. "We'll stage music, performance art and poetry readings to protest the military interventions in Aghanistan and Iraq."

"And I'll dance in the streets," her room mate Priti said.

"Which would qualify as performance art," Dimitra agreed.

"I don't think it's a good idea," said Alexander.

"And Quinn can create a graffiti/trash archive of the city's responses."

Quinn wasn't listening. He was looking out the window at the patterns of the birds.

\*

"An arrangement of strings," read the score on the table.

Dimitra looking at it through the door. Yellow sunlight.

Slight taps. Rain at the window.

“Alex?”

Alexander bent under the piano lid, dragging quarters along the strings.

Obsessed with making new sounds out of old things.

Cage of glass, score scribbled on gin-soaked napkins.

Evening unrolling, yellow sunlight deepening.

Somewhere in the back of her mind the strange unhinged sound of piano strings groaning.

3.

Seen: first the gray sky spread mercilessly down. Horn gray. River gray.

And birds—what kind were they?—black tears.

Marked as bruised arms, marked as the cut stump of a tree.

Marked as a tree rent by lightning. And he climbed inside. *Is this home.*

Dimitra in the doorway listening.

Here the uncurling of days, the unbecoming sky.

Priti is helping Quinn unpack a box of books.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter,” he says. “They aren’t even mine.”

“Where did you get them?” she asks. “*A Short History of the Sepoy Rebellion. Understanding Cometary Phenomenon. Tristram Shandy.*”

“I think that box was out of the street and I just grabbed it on my way out of town. Sometimes people write in them.”

“This one has math equations in the margins!” she said excitedly, holding up the astronomy book.

Quinn was silent. She looked up to see him looking at her. Suddenly he reached out, took her chin, turned her face this way and that.

“No,” he said then. “You are too used to being watched. I suppose you’ve been drawn too many times.”

“I like being watched,” she says. “The painter’s eye is like the camera’s lens. It’s nothing, it’s death, it’s like self-cancellation.”

Quinn knew what she meant but did not say so.

4.

The unstruck sound can be heard.

Alexander plays Cage's 4'33" over and over again, sometimes with an open piano and sometimes with a closed piano.

These other times the wind.

These other times with open music.

These other times counting backwards and forwards.

Through the crated veil another telling.

Pass the curtains and derive the far equation.

He can't pick up any old trash and make it into something, Alexander reasons. He has to comb through trash-piles and strategically choose things. That's why Dimitra said "trash-archive."

Music is like that, unfolding in space through time.

Trash sculpture unfolds in time through space.

Accumulating and accumulating.

So they *could* make something together.

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Left to her own devices Priti might have left or written something on her own.

It's right through the window the arrow the driven.

Driven to remember she recites: derived from percussive agenda its three beats on a drum.

Dance is a dialogue.

Form is more careful than memory. Sound of drum remands an imitative performance of preternatural symphonic choices.

Which goes against every grain: that the body should lead and the drum follow.

Classical Indian music expends and expands far past twelve Western tones.

A dancer whose casual moves derive from particle physics and cometary phenomena.

Given a choice she might refuse to go along with choreography based on music or rhythm and rely instead on her own self.

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Dimitra remembers Joachim's face.

She remembers the birds flying up into the persimmon tree, her eyes lowering, his body turning away from her.

"How shall I put my hand?" asks Priti. "Shall I close my fingers this way? It's called *chin-mudra*, the sublimation of the individual ego..."

Either way the wind drops down savage between the buildings.

To no one Dimitra asks, "Are you saying it is better for me to forget?"

Alexander raps his knuckles softly on the side of the piano.

As usual Dimitra is unsure whether he is performing music or "just thinking."

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Priti twines a curl of hair in her fingers. "So you always leave a place. When you start to feel something for the people there. Well, what is it you leave behind each time?"

Quinn grows calm. Feels the sound of the ocean coursing through him.

Priti understands. "You aren't going to say."

5.

A broken window.

Of water.

Finally the courage.

To take a shard and cut into the skin.

To fill the cut with ink.

Before: a piercing in his nose, in his eyebrow, in his lip.

A tattoo of blue wings spread across his back.

A boy flying high over the ocean.

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*Oh shine this way*

*Shine this way*

Quinn by the piers remembering.

Through a shot glass Dimitra gazes out.

Alexander distracted by the look on her face. Staring in Quinn's direction but her eyes in soft focus.

*She's looking through him—*

And someone is singing in their mind:

*Oh sign ocean sign and so the birds came to lift me...*

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Priti says, "How does all this go together?"

They are looking at all the scattered notes, choreography, musical scores, and sketches of what graffiti Quinn wants to scrawl on the gallery walls.

“Why does it have to stick together?” Quinn asks.

The TV is blaring coverage of the war. “Warnography,” Alexander called it. “Wargasm.” They had to invent new words for it.

“I know it doesn’t,” she says. “It doesn’t.”

“You think it should,” Quinn says. “Even after all this,” and he gestures to the table full of paper. “Or that,” and he looks over his shoulder at the television.

6.

No time snowing down lightly into the earth, seeded.

No time to ember last summer, relentless, amiss.

How Joachim disappeared.

“He was mine before he was yours,” Alexander reminded her after two glasses.

But now, shimmer of light, porcupous hill, scandal-monger, she wonders.

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“A five year old Iraqi girl paralyzed by a cruise missile which exploded—”

“Stop,” says Quinn.

Priti turns from the television.

“We have to get to work on this,” he says, “or we will never be finished.”

“What do you remember the most about your travels?” she asks him.

Quinn is not listening.

Night stretches like a tarpaulin. Stars turning in a wheel which in chronological time ought to take ten thousand years or more.

Know that the body and the spirit were woven together with energy.

*What do you remember the most.*

Not-listening.

7.

“He was the angel of death,” says Alex. They are on their fifth glass.

Dimitra pretends not to notice how close Alexander is sitting to her. She smells patchouli, sweet fennel...

Joachim: son of a French mother and Filipino father. Tall, swan-boned, fair-haired. And golden eyes like a wolf.

Alex imagines himself backward to him. But he was always Dimitra's. Not anymore.

“I did love him,” she says. “I did. Still do, I suppose.”

Wind, wind-throw, wind-know, west-left, left-retch, clef-sent, cleft—

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—wind—windthrown—wind-eye—windwhy—

“Sometimes your life takes a left turn,” Quinn said to Priti.

She doesn't stop dancing. She thinks if she stops he might stop talking.

*Windtunnel, windrope, windopener—*

“I didn't think I was leaving. I had to choose but I didn't know I was really choosing.”

“Did you go back?” she asked.

But he couldn't answer because Dimitra came in with Alexander. She held a piece of paper.

“It's an anonymous note slipped under the door. It says we are unpatriotic and un-American and by staging our show we are subverting the war effort and supporting the enemy.”

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The walls of the studio were covered in white sheets. “I don't want anyone to see the graffiti until the actual opening,” Quinn said.

Every time she looks at Quinn now she sees Joachim, though Joachim was taller, happier.

“Why are we even *doing* this?” she asks. “Why make drawings no one is going to look at. While we are being threatened. By someone in *this* neighborhood? I can’t believe this could happen in New York.”

Alexander turns the letter over in his hands. It is handwritten. Quinn takes the letter from him. “May I have this?” he asks Dimitra.

“Why even do this?” she asks again softly. “We’re not convincing anybody.”

8.

Dimitra watches the dark birds wheel and streak through the gray sky of the parking lot.

“Joachim loved them. Because they leave no path.”

“It’s like music,” agrees Alexander. “they appear in silence and then are gone.”

Dimitra is transparent. Even as she declares independence she depends on Alexander’s memory as well. Her mouth is full of Joachim’s tongue.

She’s barely aware that Alexander is speaking as they walk to the car. “It’s not strictly true,” he is saying. “There are no less than seventeen harmonic overtone the ear hears when a single note is struck...”

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Priti lying on the floor of the gallery next to Quinn. Stars seen through the skylight.

“Then you forget,” he is saying half to her, half to himself. “Years and years of this and you don’t remember anymore what you said to who, where you left off, what you thought you were doing, where you thought you were going...”

“And then it’s years later, you’ve moved four times, none of your mail gets forwarded anymore and you think probably everyone you cared about along the way has forgotten about you a long time ago...”

“The problem is that they’re still brand new to you. You remember the last time you saw them perfectly. You still love them the way you always did. It hasn’t occurred to you that it was nine years ago actually—

“One day you are cleaning out the canvas bag to go buy groceries and you find this receipt in there from three cities ago and you just think: *I have no idea who I even am...*”

Priti, counting stars, drifting tunelessly in half-sleep, suddenly realizes he has been talking to her—

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“Everything counts,” Dimitra says “Everything is important. What we say. What we do.”

“You’re saying this because of the letter. It’s handwritten. We can find out who wrote it.”

Does she care who wrote the letter? The threaded landscape. The piano strings being scratched by coins. Birds wheeling in the sky.

“I’m calling Joachim tonight.”

He looks at her then. Panicked. He doesn’t want her to call. He doesn’t want her to get to Joachim first. He doesn’t want Joachim to hear her voice, after all these years, first.

Her fingers above the buttons on the phone. The long space between the tip of her finger and the small plastic square. She knows his number by heart of course.

Years since she’s heard his voice, talked to him.

Wondering if she should call. Wondering why he hasn’t.

And now, calling late into the night. Purposely leaving no time for talk. Just in case he should actually answer.

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Alexander is rehearsing in his mind all the things he should have said to Joachim when he had a chance. He wants to snatch the phone from Dimitra’s hand.

He turns to the car window. Plays back his score: found music, recorded sounds, conversation on the street, newscasts, a broom sweeping broken glass from the concrete, a key turning in a lock.

Quinn can make sense of it, he thinks, coldness in his stomach. Dimitra with her finger still hovering an inch away from the buttons on the phone.

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Priti rising up on the swells of sleep on the gallery floor.

Written on top of writing.

All the writing collages, graffiti on the walls shimmering like the ocean.

“Is it even real?” she asks.

The diary she once kept on huge sheets torn from a pad of butcher paper. She rolled each one up and slid it into a mailing tube, sent each one to another Priti Krishna in a different city.

She told about her day, the ordinary things but also about the dances she invented, the people who came to see her. She wrote it as if she were writing in a diary to herself. In a way all those women were herself, she thought.

She imagined their faces, wondered if they had families, if they went to college, wondered what they were doing with their lives.

She looked up their street numbers in the phone book, lettered each tube and sent it off with no return address.

9.

Dimitra hovers like birds on a hot air current.

*If she calls what will we she say if he answers?*

*Otherwise if he doesn't answer what can she put into her voice that will translate itself into the machine?*

And Alexander:

*How can I reach him after all these years, how can I remind him of how to love me? What words can I use to make him choose me?*

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The constellated swirls. Murks. Quinn sleeps. Priti runs her finger lightly over the graphite matte of words Quinn has slicked across every surface inn the place

A need to really say everything, write everything.

Then thinking: I want to leak into this.

*He's given everything away, she thinks.*

*Not even close, he thinks.*

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This is how I imagine the ocean—

You've never been to the ocean?

Never.

I went in November. Ember. Remember.

This is what is feels like

Careful

Care fill. Fill me.

Full of you.

Storm on the ocean where no one sees

I see

Look at me while you do this

Fill me

/

She has to go across the widest space.

Her finger moves now automatically. *It's okay*, she says to herself. *Just let your body do this. You just watch while your body does this.*

This is insane. Why call him now.

Alexander thinks: *should I stop her?* He looks hard out the window.

She catches sight of his face reflected there. Looking at her, reflected in his window, with a look of panic.

And then someone answers. "Hello?"

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It's this moment, Priti whispers to herself.

Standing still here.

While the music slowly evaporates.

And people shift from foot to foot watching a perfectly still body on the stage.

Music drifting to silence.

Minute after minute.

Watching each minute shift.

The lights don't go down.

And you sit there wondering if something is supposed to be happening.