

**A Light No More**

Eternity bores me,  
I never wanted it.  
—Sylvia Plath, “Years”

“Sleeping was an adventure every night, falling from the easy clarity in which she lived into the same mystery, dark and cool, crossing darkness. Dying and being reborn.”  
—Clarice Lispector, *Near to the Wild Heart*

When I was a small girl, you said, I dreamed I was different girl. To my own name I did not answer.

At night she came to me in her gown of white cotton. She was blonde, as I was not, but when she leaned over me now I was blonde. And I became blue-eyed, for she was blue-eyed, and rose-lipped, for she was rose-lipped. And I slept as she must have slept. Her own name she whispered in my ear to call me awake. And when I woke so she was yet there. She in her white gown, pooled like moonlight, and then she in my bed, and so like moonlight she flowed over me.

The young doctor who came to your house when you were not yet six, the satchel he carried with him, the instruments he did remove, devices for listening to and perceiving the movement of organs. Your brother confined to his bed—his pale face and blood bright lips—His rasping breath. The doctor seated beside his bed, instruments placed at the boy's breast. Yes, yes, now again. Yes.

Consume ladled from a silver tureen—roast lamb—candles flickering, dripping wax—your father in black coat—his black eyes—your mother in dark blue gown—her black hair tied-up—From across the table the doctor to you alone spoke. None of this is here, he said, and now when his wrist flicked his hand, the others stilled, mouths yet opened, their voices lost in the air. You see?

At your brother's bedside, your mother is weeping and your father leans silently against the wall. Your brother is a shadow; over his face the doctor pulls a sheet. They will attire him in black velvet and place him in a box; they will put him on display.

Your mother's face lost beneath her veil.

Your father will never again say your brother's name. His eyes will see you, and they will not.

Your brother's voice comes to you as you sleep, his breath cool to your ear,

Elizabeth, I

cannot see, I

cannot see,

please

Some other year they found your father in his nightclothes, his mouth frozen unhinged, and his eyes too locked open. Your mother to see him beside her could not scream but some hoarse noise issued.

He would never again move. The doctor would bring his instruments, prod and listen. No indication of malady or affliction. The life removed from him as he slept, as if some fiend upon his breast pressed without relent.

From the doorway you watched. If they cut him open, something then might escape.

Elsewhere you were sent. Your mother did not kiss you through her veil.

Your girlhood in strict gray uniform, the other girls like-wise dressed. Their gossiping and plotting and giggling, sneaking Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* until the old maids found and confiscated and burned those volumes, gray ash caught by gray New England winds. How the maids preferred the living language of the dead saints. How they prayed before eating and before sleeping and before the preacher at his pulpit, thundering about an “invisible species of menace.” How they demanded you gently incline your head and humbly clasp your hands.

O God you thought O God O God

They said you did not speak during your first year at the school although it is true you did scream in the night the names of those who were once your family.

Now the other girls: Sarah, pale and shy, and Rebecca, the lovely one even the maids doted on, and Ruth, the politician's daughter who seemed to study all in her silence, and Claire, who shared your room. Claire, who whispered to you from her bed, gossiped, impersonated the maids, her voice become gnarled and clucking and severe. Claire, with her black eyes and blacker hair, and her pale hands and long neck, and Claire in her nightgown, and Claire in her blue velvet gown on days of leisure. And you thought, what girl is under there? And while bathing, and while in bed drifting to sleep, you measured the lines and feel of your body—and you thought *is this how she is*, and you thought, *she must be something more*.

And summer days when you had not lessons you and Claire snuck away to the forest and then the pond, dragonflies dimpling the surface. Now perhaps Claire read from *Mansfield Park*, and her head on your shoulder and your arm on her arm, and softly her voice, your eyes drooping in the summer heat. Or perhaps you spoke of your families, your lives before this life. So Claire told stories about her father, the banker, and her mother, prim and haggard before her seven children. And you told her that your mother lived in mansion with all the slaves of her burden tending her gardens, while your father was a merchant ship's captain. Now you described his journeys to climes exotic and strange for, you said, he wrote you of lavish delights—the very air perfumed with cinnamon and the monkeys scampering on shoulders and the women in silk veils dancing and the ancient cities, the buildings of gold. But when she asked you to read to her from these letters you said you had them no longer.

Some nights you woke and where once Claire upon her bed now sat the doctor, elbows to his knees and his hat in hand, his features shifting into shadows and blurs. To him you could not speak nor could you move and when you tried now he pressed his hand to your breast so deeply it seemed plunged within.

And summer days you and your schoolmates strolled about the meadows, uniforms and parasols, and along the wharfs when the ships came in, the commotion of sailors and crews, such languages and costumes and hues alien to this nation. And you girls gazed in wonder at tattooed men clad scantily, unloading casks of spice and sugar and silk and rum. And you stopped at cent-shops for ginger beers and ribbons and candies and little cakes, while outside farm boys leaned against posts, grass blades wagging from smiling lips. Now the maids ever in your company scowled and hurried you along while the boys winked and mouthed, "Meet me," and you girls giggled or blushed and averted your gaze, or returned the gaze with bold naive instinct, yearning in that moment for what you scarcely knew.

Evenings the maids reclined on a porch swing with needlework and darning in an approximation of leisure, while from across the yard you and Claire and others mocked their manner and age, the weariness of their flesh, their puritan severity, their pet phrases. So it seemed you would never grow so wearisome and old.

Such were the summers of your youth, when the world hummed and burned with life. The grasshoppers, their high mad song, and deer, poised in fear and then vanished into the long grasses. And those girls, holding hands and singing, and laughing, now long extinct and forgotten by all, save you, who must remember everything.

his lips

breath

O

The girl who later joined your class, her blue eyes lost within black hollows that expanded and expanded for they said she never slept, and her blacker hair, curly and abundant until the maids forced her to tie it back. And when called upon in class she knew not the answers, nor the subject, and so was made to stand in the corner. When with the other girls she spoke not but regarded always her clasped hands, her shoes, yet when alone with you, knitting and darning, she muttered openly of how she hated the school. And when you said yes, you too abhorred the tedium, through gritted teeth she seethed, “No, I *hate* it.”

At night beneath her blankets she wept.

And then the morning she was not found in bed. Rebecca’s screams when they discovered her along the shore, wrapped green in weeds, and smothered with mud. Beneath this soil, dead pale and sodden was she. Bathed and gowned and laid in the chapel, and over her the maids spoke.

They said she wandered in the night—her way lost—into the pond abruptly fallen—

She is on a table of slate—pale nude, water fat—and from shadows now the doctor.

In his hand a scalpel—

what hum of flies

Eventually a cold breeze drifts even the hottest August days, and the trees burn into new colors, and where once the fireflies now the long shadow of night and the groaning of the wind alone. And there comes a certain musk in the autumn air a young girl might mistake for romance and she might long to walk the orchard isles with her beloved and there beneath apple laden boughs he will wrap her in his coat, his arms, for the coming chill; that autumn musk that she is too young to know is the decay of life and the coming of death, and she mistakes that melancholy and loss instinct prepares in her as owed to this beau, who will forget her soon.

And then you are returned to your lectures and desks, uniform and mirthless. And returned to the old maids, unloved and withered and stiff, their droning instruction in watercolor and needlepoint and the violin. And literature, which was life itself when beheld in the secret of your room, now turned to dust when handled by the maids. And at this school the skinning of cats and the inspecting of the interior elements of frogs was hardly considered lady-like and so you took what they called “botany” and here you dissected flowers; and you took chirography and how supple and elegant Claire’s lines, while yours carried little accuracy or art; and you learned your grammar from the sternest of the old maids and no more of this dreary class shall be said; and from an ancient man, bald and ragged flesh on sticks, you learned Racine and Moliere, and so this fellow cracked at your feet with a fiddle bow when your pronunciation lapsed or your attention waned; and you took art, and there the young teacher, Charles, dark haired and blue eyed, pale and red lipped, who took you on sketching trips to the docks wild with sailors and the thrashing ocean and to the fields of grasses and flowers purple and yellow and red;

and how almost feverish he became when watching a colony of gulls at flight or the imperious sun burning at noon, and you girls swooned and giggled when he turned his back and called him “Charlie” and “Werther” and “Keats.” How he praised Claire’s refined accurate representations; his hand upon her shoulder as he said, “I do not even need to look upon the meadow to know the meadow,” and how Claire in her deprecation flushed. And for you he held no expectation so gently he admonished your artless blurs and smears, representing nothing, save, perhaps, that nature held within your mind.

Before I died I—

he has seen the greater world, surely known the women there,

his lips, full and red

indecent

O

when he leans over my shoulder,

his fingers;

his breath

how he maddens me

how I long for him

And evenings Claire did immerse in her studies; how you admired her diligence and easy memory. You at your own studies, and how there readings assigned wrapped and strangled your mind until your eyes glazed and your limbs burned. And then you saw those words no more, as you fell into worlds unseen.

And here you were a girl that was not you, and within her you walked shores distant, and looked upon creatures brightly leathered, how their yellow eyes looked upon you and black tongues flicked. And when Claire interrupted your reverie to ask some question of the text, you blinked dazed and said, "Oh, I'm not sure. What do you think?" How Claire rolled her eyes, said your name in amused concern, but all knew you were no scholar, and none held it against you.

And on Sunday, the day of rest, you studied not but you read from books of celestial thought like “The Evidence of Prophecy” and sang hymns with the others. And while the others patched dresses and darned stockings and replaced buttons, you read aloud from the King James Bible and some now considered you almost maniacal in your devotion, for your eyes did widen and your voice did quiver. And nights rather than dream you did whisper and hum to yourself the strange rhythms and thorny language, for here seemed the true flush of divinity. And you found Job in his anguish the finest and how your soul did roil with the cadences of his suffering. And when you were meant to write on the nature of beauty you instead wrote, “\_\_\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_\_\_” and when admonished you insisted you had not known such language from your pen did flow.

And when—

And—

A mirror above you—

Your eyes, yet not your eyes.

And—

Into her belly a scalpel slid, and into the wound the doctor's hands. Yes, he said, as I thought. From this cavern a robin pried free, and in hands cupped this robin, matted with once-life.

You see, he continued, she was dreaming the entire time.

Where once autumn now follows ice and snow and lashing wind. You girls crowded on a sleigh, jolting and gliding and jolting again. Bundled in scarves and mittens and hats, chattering mouths, white breath— girls either side of you, rubbing their mittens together, the warmth of bodies pressed to bodies—sleigh bells—tall dead grasses the snow banks swallow—Black lines of trees —Children laughing—scampering—shouting—

a top hat knocked from a banker's head

And early darkness— shrill winds malevolent—Needlework in the firelight, wood smoke and crackling. In the total dark, creaking board and shifting wall, some presence ventures to impose wickedness upon virgin flesh, young and crone alike.

And shivering in your separate beds—eyes wide—creaking and gusting and howling—

snow dense swirling night

—until Claire curled beside you, or you went to her, and now your warmth became mutual.

You—

down narrow cobbled streets you followed her, houses bent in shadow, girls laughing just beyond your sight, windows black, and yet they gave a light—into one of these buildings she went, a house whose door opened for her, but not for you.

above you a mirror and in the mirror

you called her name and again—and now her arms about you—tears smeared—“I’m here, Betty, Betty, I’m here.”

His lips his

His fingers, slender,

a brush, a pencil

His fingers on Claire's shoulder, her

*my*

There were birds, yet the world was gray,

Then a room, and there the doctor: his great black coat, his beard and hair, flecked with snow melting. Behind him the maids stood silently.

He told you of your mother's death, and when you said nothing in return, he continued. It was—it happened as with your father. You shook your head. I don't know what that means.

Yes you do, he said. His hand upon yours. You have seen it. Many times.

Before I—

No, not I

*You*

Your mother called you from another room. She on her sofa rigid—her black veil  
clinging to her tears—

Please, hurry. She placed your palm to her chest—There—Do you feel it move? Her  
fingers edged into your wrist. How it scurries, you see?

She spoke in a whisper. She spoke as if she did not know who you were.

There is—some animal is living inside of me—he scurried inside me as I slept—now he  
has—now he has made his nest.

Will you—

Please, get it out of me.

You saw now the letter opener upon her knees. The blood dried blade.

I tried, and I cannot.

Her eyes—her—the hollow of her mouth open—already the flies—

a voice— shimmering static—

shi m ningngd ro

meri

stati mm ing c hu

through tar a

featureless face

leering

with violet eyes

You stepped before your mother, recumbent in her box, black veiled and gowned as in life, her sallow expressionless face. Perhaps they sewed her lips shut, so her voice could not struggle free.

How old you became without Father, you whispered into what was once her ear. Perhaps it was best you sent me away.

And behind you: breathing and shifting. And behind you: eyes hushed, and eyes moving. Surely they thought: she is a strange child.

They could not bury her for the ground frozen so her box they hammered shut and into a drawer she went until in the churchyard beside your father they could plant her. And then Mother would mold and warp with roots. And then Mother would disintegrate. And then perhaps Mother would venture to you no more.

Then from the ceiling tar did rain until this robin tar-deformed watched from hands no more. You see, the doctor said, she was dreaming the entire time.

When came the Christmas holidays the other girls journeyed home. You alone with the maids did remain. How you wept and embraced Claire. How she said she would think of you. Write me, you cried. O Claire I will write you daily. The train she disappeared into. The sun blurred windows you watched for some motion of her shadow.

I will I will of course Betty

Gifts you were given for Christmases past: a gold locket, a silver hand mirror, a gown of green velvet, a gown of red velvet, a doll whose haunted eyes tormented Claire no matter where in the room she stood. This Christmas holiday you were given no gift but the continuous company of the maids, as they consumed quantities vast of “healthful” and “curative” Hot Toddies, while in careful pious ways they gossiped and impugned their neighbors. And when to you they did speak you nodded only in return, your eyes glazed, your mind often—

I will write you of

And then the snow blue in the moon light—windows yellow lit with candles—somewhere carolers—And then the vastness of a church—a quiet immense—rows of pews, and coughing sniffing shifting children—the long drone of a sermon and prayers and hymns. And Christmas Eve dinner—there the minister and the minister’s son—there the servant girl and the bounty she brought—a goose crinkled brown, yams, cranberries—somewhere the cook—and then near a fire glowing you the piano played as

the minister “\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_” and then his son “\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_.” And the maids—their  
rapt pious attention—

Dearest Claire—

O Betty I—

Then nights listening to silence alone, save for what blood through your veins did thrum and what nerves did whistle and spark and what breath your lungs did expunge. And when you closed your eyes a universe did there burst and streak. In the haze Claire stood, uniformed as in life, her eyes smiling, mischievous and too knowing, and when she said your name now you hoped she said it with love. And so in this place you and Claire were together alone, and there you two would remain, locked in youth perpetual, long past that hour of bone and dust.

And even this house emptied of life save your own did heave and groan. For within the boards of floors and plaster and paint of walls those who had in these rooms lived yet persisted in its ancient imagination, phantasms fleshless and without breath, wandering and chattering within the perpetual dream of a thing undreaming.

And perhaps there are those these centuries hence that eavesdrop on your confessions, and hear in the cracking of walls and the whispering of floors the desires and dreams of girls long dead.

O god you will never see her again. Dead, dead, she is—And yet here her voice,

Before a mirror you stood and what face resembling yours in everyway was now reflected. And if you smiled now she smiled and if you pulled at the corners of your mouth now some hands much like your own pulled at the corners of her mouth and if you

did blink or if you did stare with intensity or if you did loll your tongue or if you did cover your eyes save for the slightest peep in vision now she did the same.

In all ways she did seem you, yet in her eyes some spark not your own.

And perhaps she was you, remembered from time other. And perhaps she was no such thing.

And nights in this house emptied you listened alone to what whispers did call you. Voice of static and crackling, your body not your own, for now you did not think “Rise” but still you rose. And now into a hallway emptied—no, a—And you thought I cannot breathe and you thought my heart will explode and—

what smell of dust and—

And what darkness and motion of shadows—what limbs of trees and—

And then you were before his door, and you knew it was his door although the door wore no marker, and to this room you had never been, forbidden as you were, and yet, you knew. And how you trembled and how your heart did seem near to bursting and how— And now your belly to the floor, your cheek, rough scrape, the cold, and beneath his door, darkness only—

what dreams somewhere did he

there his bed, somewhere, once, there his body, at rest, skin and muscle, chest and arms, calves, toes, movement of—what hair, here his chest, here his— arms, how they would wrap, what—fingers, lips, his—rustle of breathing, sweet breath—warm—his fingers, his fingers, his lips, what within, between those lips, what—smoldering

his name his name his name—

The maids found you upon the floor feverish. So they told you when in bed you woke and all the world did seem to burn and drip. You shivered and shivered and you said aloud there was a voice. And now they did quiet you. And no more would they say of the condition they discovered you in, but observed you silently while the servant girl spooned broth between your lips, and placed upon your brow a cool damp cloth.

How dead it lay—how it seethed

And then Claire sat beside your bed—dampened the cloth dried out—how quickly it warmed against your brow—and to your lips she ladled fatty broth while talking pleasantly of her holiday, her family—while you shivered—while the broth ran down your chin and now with the cloth she dabbed—

while you pleaded *please hold me* for your body burned and ached and you were so cold

The doctor was said to visit you often. Occasionally you woke and there he sat already asking you questions—and so your lips did move for those questions you were already answering—and then you were awake and he was murmuring and heavily breathing—the tin horn to your chest he pressed—your chest to the air exposed —yes, yes—the movement of mechanisms unseen, their language mysterious, and yet—from his satchel a dull shine of razor—and now the vein he did——arc of blood—the porcelain basin red streaked, a black puddle growing—

And the doctor said: They told me you were walking in the night—

[Blank]

Do you remember anything?

No

Nothing of what you said to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ when she found you?

No. . . . What did I say?

[But he would not answer.]

And the doctor said: Are you certain you remember nothing?

I—

Was it this?

and now flies from a mouth opened droned free—

How does he creep to you? What does he whisper and in what noise?

He—He is a shadow alive

And when he stands before my bed there comes not a sound but crackling—the noise in a storm—and when he crouches upon my chest— a pressure tremendous—

Does he speak—

yes—a language unknown—

When their schooling concluded many classmates returned home, now that they could darn and sing and chatter intelligently. These girls before mirrors in secret hours, preparing obtain a man of wit and charm and means.

Soon new girls where once—

And then Claire too was gone. The letter informing her she been hired to teach clutched in her hand, how wide her eyes and flushed her cheeks as she told you. And you thought of the emptiness of the bed across from your bed. And you thought, “I should smile now,” so you smiled. And you thought, “I should be glad for her,” and so you said in a voice you made joyous and pleased, “This is what you’ve dreamed of, I’m so happy for you,” and Claire laughed, “Oh thank you, yes, it’s wonderful.” And you said she must now wield a ruler cruelly and dress as the maids dress and you both laughed. And now Claire put her hands to your hands, “And what will you do? Not live with those old maids your entire life—” and it seemed you had never before considered this idea. “I don’t know,” you finally said. “Perhaps I will become a teacher.” So Claire smiled almost sadly: “Yes, perhaps you will become a teacher.” And then she saw your expression and she let your hands drop. “Oh my Betty,” she smiled. “You will visit often, won’t you?”

Claire seated primly in the carriage, her pale rosy cheeks and dark blue bonnet. She smiled and waved, and the sun glared the window. Perhaps she called your name as the carriage diminished. There you stood until Claire was no more, and then this was all you had.