

EVENTIDE

Quintin Jose V. Pastrana

I am the Sea,
cut and folded;
I am the last evening fallen
on an enchanted shoulder.

- 'What the Rose Said', Michael Hanlon

The window let in some of that magic hour I'd grown accustomed to.

"How was your day, my darling?"

My hand stretched across to caress hers. While she didn't shirk back, she didn't clasp it either.

"Five minutes early this time, love... and look at what I brought you!"

My hand coiled back to hold out the framed collodion of us: locked in an endless gaze; or at least long enough for the exposure to take hold.

"Remember when you taught me to trust and keep still and let light, time, and molecules do their magic? I believe you... Take a look."

I took care not to leave fingerprints on the pane bordered with narra strips I had salvaged in her studio, dovetailed together each day I got home from work, hewed until it fit.

"Back then, love, we had all these plans. You said—*please look at me*—right at the click of that shutter, that whatever happens, we would take care of each other. Don't you remember?"

"Time will darken it." She discarded the portrait with her eyes. Her hands retreat beneath the table's surface.

At that point I didn't know if she was talking about the image: how the emulsions on glass would congeal, spread, then slowly fade over time in the presence of air. Or about us, too.

She looked around the room, faintly lit by the candles I had arranged before coming up. Our shadows loomed on the nearest wall.

“We look so different... I looked so different.”

She did... we both did. And those eyes that once gazed at me—with me—*now looked through me.*

“Why did you bring me here?”

“But love, this is where...”

“I want to go home.”

“But this...”

“Take me home... now!” She scowled at me: her anger, visceral and blunt.

She looked down at her empty plate, almost as if to see her reflection, and at that point I didn’t know if she recognized what had just happened.

I wanted to smash the glass plate on my knee, that projection of love and us. I took deep breaths, stood up and shook my head: it was really all I had left of her. I walked to the edge of the room and placed our photograph on the shelf that still harboured the scent of the bouquet I’d laid there last week.

From the corner, I looked past her, too, toward the surrounding dusk and that bird on the wire right outside the steel window. It was the same, unremarkable one from before; almost always watching us—and I swear it could have recited this same conversation by rote.

I approached, carefully, until I stood close enough to lean downward to try and place her head close to my heart. She didn’t resist, but her arms didn’t reciprocate to meet mine, only to push ever so slightly, to glance at my face. I could barely look back, because of what I knew I wouldn’t find each time I kept my gaze on her any second longer.

She said no more to me even as her lips were pursed and trembling. I pressed the buzzer, and as help came, she looked away and into the waiting nightfall.

There would be no stars tonight, not by the open parking lot I’d pace around aimlessly, bracing myself before each visit, asking for some sign.

I stepped out into the hallway where the gurneys and orderlies stood motionless, speechless, and shut the door behind me, not looking back. The noise of my heels, dragging on the linoleum, ceased when I stopped to look

at the muted TV on the wall. There, I lingered long enough to finish this marathon scene of a *Mission Impossible* sequel we'd glossed over in a crowded cinema long ago—the one where Ethan Hunt sprints and leaps off, tethered to the side of a rounded, desert skyscraper—only to miss the opening from a shattered glass wall.

That was the last time she held me close, and truly looked at me, in the darkness.

And now this shard in my stomach was replaced with the void of falling.