

Between Our Stars

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I came out into the hallway to write because something in the cheap wooden furniture and dust-cluttered linoleum of the dorm room, aglow with acrid fluorescent light, would not let me write the way I wanted. There's the same awful, forced fluorescence in the hallway, but I am thinking it will be better, easier, out here.

I lay in Lydia's extra bed for a little while that evening, listening as she talked on the phone with her doctor. She was folded on her own bed, half sitting and half lying, with Pete sitting near the foot of it and leaning up against the rough cinderblock wall, holding her hand. Lydia is usually folded—it's her disease. Now, as she spoke, she curled her knees in to lie flat on her chest, then stretched her legs up vertically above her; she moved one leg then the other slowly, cautiously, away from the center of her body, towards two opposite off-white walls of her small room, assessing their range of motion and relating the good results back through the phone to her doctor. Everything seemed to be able to move, though very carefully, without anything shaking or shattering or slipping out of place.

I curled my elbows around my head and rested them on one of her Indonesian silk pillows, my arms bristling slightly against the scratchy-smoothness of its embroidered red and green surface. I buried my head in the nest of arms and pillow, interspersing my view of color fields—skin and red and green and the chalky soullessness of the walls and floor and ceiling—with patches of looking across the tile expanse at Lydia, her bed pushed up against the opposite wall. As her conversation unfolded halfway before me, I found myself getting stuck in phrases: *Hospital for Joint Diseases—internal bleeding . . . felt like that time with my hips, when no one believed me until I got an MRI—actually he said it was longer than three hours—do you want to talk to my friend, the one who was there for it?* That meant Pete. And so Pete took the little red cellphone, and told Lydia's doctor how she had fallen off the bed, how she had convulsed for three—*longer than three*—hours the night before on the cold linoleum dorm-room floor. Pete recalled that watching her there was like

watching someone being violently beaten, only without anyone there doing the beating. Lydia broke in every few times Pete responded to the doctor's questions with a "Yeah." "Say *Yes*," she nagged in a half-whisper, dragging out the S sound in hopes that he would get the hint.

When Lydia talked to her doctor she sounded more polite, careful, more southern. Momentary noise in the hallway, intruding through the open door, elicited an, "I'm sorry would you mind please repeating what you just said," the words strung tightly, elegantly together into an unfamiliar garland, despite the delicate drawl.

From across the room, I still listened, looked, sinking into the lavender blanket beneath me, the air thick with softly-spoken words and little movements, the tiny heavy humanness of it. A fluorescent desk light lit the room with a fuzzy glow, that hovered in a state somewhere between light and shadow, tinted with the navy blue January evening outside the window. I thought then about the room in photographs: how the shadow on the cinderblock behind Pete's head, its borders already indistinct, would blend itself into a haze with the rough curls of blond hair that cast it; I pictured the still life of little labeled orange bottles, notebook, leather basket on the black end table next to Lydia's bed. The shots, the images, wouldn't come out right, I decided. Not enough light would make it through the lens.

In the days preceding, the room had acquired an unfamiliar mess of clothing and newspapers, the everyday detritus piling up against the delicateness she had established there. The two little potted plants sitting on the heating unit against the window, burned sticks of incense that emerged from the soil like bamboo; the trilogy of cloths, dyed into images of faceless, moving women, hung upon the wall and descending toward her bed; handwritten passages of the Dhammapada and Barack Obama were scotch-taped to empty spaces on a wall. The room enveloped her, and us, illuminated us in the dim glow. We lay and sat there, a trilogy, scattered about the room in the gathering stillness. Lydia pressed herself up towards sitting; the whiteness of the big pillows behind her, propping her up, had an uncomfortable hospitalness to them. I didn't think I had seen them before. Her pale shoulders rested against the pillows' brightness, dark hair falling haphazardly onto them. There was a bitter irony in my feeling so far away from her, so powerless to help, as I lay there strewn uselessly across the bed in that tiny rectangle of a room, the cinderblock walls close enough to touch.

Eventually, some short time after the phone call had ended, I gathered myself up from the extra bed, from the hazy shadows and little tragedies that

hung uncertainly in the room. I asked Lydia to let me know if there was anything she needed, said I might be back later, after I had gotten some work done, and then walked into the harsh fluorescent hallway, out of her room.

* * *

A few days ago, I was walking across Gould Plaza, the creaky, clunky stone squares of that paved and well-suited expanse in front of the Tisch building. I was coming from a class, had just been let out, and I was walking back on my own; as it turns out, the stones I was stepping on and occasionally setting slightly off-balance were lying directly above the subterranean lecture hall from which I had just emerged. In any case, the afternoon was a familiar light winter grey; the air was soggy with old mist; the streets and stones were dark and damp from an earlier rain. I don't mind the weather, the rain, Washington Square as a black and white photograph, slightly over-exposed. I live in it.

Stepping down stone stairs onto the sidewalk, I continued walking towards home and the end of the day. I slowed, though, only a few steps from the plaza; a bird lay dead on the sidewalk. Its feathers were shades of grey and white, and tousled considerably on the wings—from the impact, I figured, of colliding so suddenly with the concrete. From its coloring alone, I had assumed it was a pigeon, yet it lacked the shimmering green feather-necklace and distasteful obesity of the New Yorker breed. I circled the bird—well, semi-circled it, keeping pace with the partly-aware streams of migrating students walking on the cobblestone street. I watched the bird; it lay, of course, unmoving, unchanged. Around its head had gathered a small puddle of blood, like a bit of spilt nail polish (Revlon red, or something like it). The little well of blood, the tangible fact of death, made the scene too human. Why were there no miniature bands of yellow caution tape, no winged coroners and reporters and feathered family members? Instead, the onlookers were a few passing students, the ones willing to offer a curious glance on their way to class. And I, too, remained only for a moment more, then turned my boot-heels on the slippery, brown cobblestone and walked away.

Again I was lying on Lydia's extra bed. She was in her own bed, across the room, and clipped to the wooden frame at the pillow end was her reading lamp, spilling its familiar yellow glow into the dim room. We had her new TV on, perched on the heater in front of the window. The screen tinged that edge of the room blue, and we were watching as MSNBC commentators—Lydia

knew all their names, which ones were her favorites and which she thought I would like—discussed the day’s primaries. Obama had just taken Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D. C. This was good news. McCain and Huckabee were still too close for anyone to determine a Republican winner. Earlier in the evening, I had sat on the linoleum floor, right up near the TV, watching while the votes were still being counted. As it snowed we had, for a while, been looking past the images of newscasters and delegate counts, distracted by the big white flakes falling down against the backdrop of evening sky and city brick. But the flurries had stopped, leaving our rectangle of a view as dry and empty as usual, split in half by the old metal window pane and its handles. The outside, through the window, had darkened to navy, with only a thin sheet of foot-printed white slush visible if you got close enough to the glass and looked down. I was lying on my stomach on top of the soft, scratchy, lavender blanket stretched across the bed, my elbows pressed into the bed as my hands cradled my chin, held up my head. I was looking alternately at the artificial-bright blue of the television screen and at the two round depressions in the mattress where my weight was forcing it down. Lydia had slouched back against the big white pillows. I think she was still watching the news.

As we lay there, in the warmth of the room, Mike swung through the door from the hallway. He usually moves and speaks in slightly frantic jolts, as he did then: “Someone’s having a seizure outside, on the sidewalk, come look,” he told us, urgently, with a worried excitement. Lydia pulled herself up from the bed and over to the window where Mike was standing, looking down. I followed her there. Against the rumpled blanket of wet white snow on the sidewalk, a boy, a college student, lay on his stomach, face down, his arms near his sides with fingers bent sharply into what Lydia recognized as a seizure clench. A notebook was open on the snow near his right shoulder, a few papers scattered about. Mike had seen him fall outside, though I don’t remember when or how he realized that the stumble had triggered something worse in the boy—it was some time after Mike had made it inside the building. The boy was stiff, unmoving against the sidewalk; then a wave of shaking, convulsing, rippled through his body and hovered there for seconds or minutes or what could have felt alternately like moments or days. By now two or three more boys had filtered into Lydia’s room, and we all stood against the window, watching. A few people had gathered near the boy, some passing kids and a security guard speaking intermittently into his walkie-talkie. Another wave of the seizure barreled into the boy, and as he shook and his head lifted in little jolts, we could see the blood that had spilled from his face

when he hit the concrete. An ambulance had been parked for hours just across the street—some surreal coincidence—but no one emerged from it.

“Should we do something? Should I go down there?” Mike spurted amid the frantic wanderings and phrases of everyone in the room. We convinced him that no, another bystander wouldn’t help anything, he would only get in the way.

“Where’s Pora, she’s an EMT? Should we get her?”

“She isn’t here.”

“Shouldn’t we call 911?”

“Someone probably called already, don’t you think?” Lydia took out her cellphone and dialed, told them where we were and what was going on outside below us. No one else had called.

We were still hovering around the window when a police van pulled up and a man ran out from the ambulance toward the unconscious, shaking student on the blood-smeared, snowy sidewalk. I stood with everyone else until I felt nauseous and my head got too heavy and too full of a mess of thoughts and fears that I couldn’t untangle. And so I went back to the extra bed and lay down, my hands shaking slightly as they sometimes do. I lay on my back, trying to calm myself, until I couldn’t anymore, curling up on my side into a tighter and tighter ball of arms and knees and shoulders, thinking of the boy and the seizure and what would happen after the seizure, the hospital, and after—how he would feel. Would he remember the black of his face down against the sidewalk, or would he have seen his blood, bright red, on the nearly fresh snow? The blood, like the small puddle by the head of the bird, the dead bird I had passed days before, gathered bright and glaring on the sidewalk, all evidence of it gone by the next day.

Back in my own room, in my own bed, I lay down listening to *The Songs of Leonard Cohen*, as I often do, especially when I want to blanket my own frantic thoughts with his more beautiful ones, his slowly unfolding poetry. “Stories of the Street” comes on, the eighth song. The words are by now familiar to me, yet I still find myself stuck on the elegant strangeness of the images as though hearing them for the first time. “And if by chance I wake at night, and I ask you who I am, / O take me to the slaughterhouse, I will wait there with the lamb.” Despite its grace, the imperative haunts me, erodes the soft edges of my bed; I am terrified of my own decay, my own downfall, the impenetrable isolation of death or old age or lying face-down unconscious on a snow-beaten sidewalk. And so as the song ends he offers me both a warning and a comfort: “We are so small between the stars, so large against the sky.”

The sky was Wales-grey, almost white but patched and striped with heavy, darker fog, the only sky I had seen in a week. He parked the car, something old and red, under the sky, in a gravel parking lot; an arm of the parking lot jutted out to my left into a path. We got out of the car and debated taking the longer walk down to the white beach below, settling instead on the gravel path laid out so conveniently for us. Wet stones crunched and scattered beneath my sneakers as I followed it, looking past a wooden fence at the expanse of grass and stone against the blue-grey of the sea. Perhaps if there had been sun, someone could have marked this landscape picturesque, but I liked the grey, the calm of it descending on me as I walked.

Dividing green pastures that stretched across flat land on the left and fell roughly, angularly towards the beach to my right, the gravel path was lined on either side with sheep. Their backs were marked, a spot of red or turquoise dye on dirty oatmeal wool, so that the red farmer didn't collect sheep belonging to the turquoise farmer when they were brought in from grazing. But now, they grazed; they dotted the steep decline, clinging impossibly to fields that seemed to slip away beneath their hooves, and sometimes daring to wander near where the green grass gave way to dark gravel. I took a photograph of one sheep who looked out through bramble and stones, its back labeled in red, standing only a few feet from the path. He mocked me, *silly American*, for being so enamored. And so the sheep remained, lining our path until our path faded into a large patch of grassy land that reached toward the sea and then broke off into a cliff.

The great stone balcony stretches out against the foreground, the expanse of the gardens behind it. They stand, two lovers, near a corner of the balcony, he, in a crisp tuxedo, leaning against the balustrade; she, near him, facing him, enveloped by a big black haunting cape, its feathers blossoming into an arc at the back of her head. The air is thick with fog, the morning breathing visibly onto the grey of the scene that might be unfolding in reality, or possibly only in his imagination. She tilts her head back at an awkward, uncomfortable angle, her features transitioning from the familiar look of a lover in morning light to something stranger, more distant, pleading, almost desperate. I know she's been here before—we've already seen the two of them set against the manicured, geometric paths and foliage of the garden, the slight off-balance strangeness seeming to continue forever—but something in the morning or the stone steps or his face stops her from remembering.

The gardens of *Last Year at Marienbad*, of course, are recognizable to me, the viewer. Resnais has shown it to us before; the two lovers, possible former

lovers, beneath the classical statue of two possible former lovers—mythological, it is assumed, or a former king and queen—against the gardens’ mathematical backdrop. Dotted with little conical bushes, the path branches into circular plazas and arms of smaller paths as it continues straight back towards orderly forests of round-topped trees, away from the lovers and from me, in disorientingly crisp perspective, reaching at something impossibly far off, heading towards oblivion. Extending so far, the gardens give off a weight of distance; I almost lose my focus on the lovers as my eyes drift towards the expanse of off-white stone and dark leaves. The landscape, huge and imposing in its ordered rigidity, does not blend with the lives of the people in it, nor does it serve as a simple backdrop, rolled out when two possible lovers feel inclined to step outside; rather, it encompasses the lovers, encompasses everything, lying heavy but distant over the immediate trivialities of the human drama.

I’ve felt this before. Away from the imposed darkness of the movie theater, standing under my own big grey sky as the wind and the fog and the rain settled on my face, I’ve known what it is to feel so small, so unnecessary, against something larger and more distant, though I’ve never understood it—the strange incomprehensible vastness and permanence of the land that defies us. The grey sky and the green grass and the pale turquoise sea of that corner of Wales continued forever around me and my lover.

The gardens of Marienbad had accepted its lovers as it had accepted the other shadowed figures dotting its paths. Resnais tells its stories in repetitive flashbacks, short glimpses of potential realities, a combination of evidence and dream. And yet, even Marienbad, for all its incongruity and its unfathomable largeness, can be contained. On a wall of the spa hangs a rendering of the gardens, all encompassed on a rectangular sheet no more than two feet on any side, its permanence reduced to the ephemerality of paper, grasped. And despite its hugeness, I could see and touch the thick air and the mud of the Gower, could hear the sheep and the waves as reminders of their reality and also my own.

When we reached the grass, our own pasture, it started to rain; it was not heavy rain as one would expect from the fog and clouds, but was instead a mist, negligible until the wind started whipping it in gusts and spitting it into our faces. Walking against the wind, we pushed through, dodging sheep droppings that blanketed the grass, and upon reaching a small fisherman’s shack near the edge, huddled against its brick wall, safe from the beating of the rain and wind for a few moments. I was worn down when we walked closer to the edge. I had wrapped my scarf around my head against the rain, and now the

wet purple pressed against the back of my neck and made me shiver. But in the grey of the afternoon fog and rain, the view from our grassy cliff was beautiful; the sea lost its blueness as it became more distant, so that its back edge blended almost perfectly, indistinguishably, with the light grey bottom of the sky. There was a narrow, dark protrusion in the water, a small island, not far from us, coated in patches of grass and fragmented at its low end—the edge of the island dissolving into the sea. He called it Worm’s Head. He told me how once, he had gone there with friends, had walked during low tide over temporary land and then become prisoner when the incoming tide covered the path. Staring alternately at the greyscale panorama before me, at my no-longer-white sneakers, at the side of his face, I listened to his little story and, when it ended, to the white foamy crash of the waves against the jagged shore, the distant sounds of birds and sheep and everything else behind us.

Instead of walking straight back the way we came, he led me to the right a little, and from up where we stood, he pointed out a small white house huddled in isolation on a much lower cliff. The house seemed at risk of slipping unnoticed into the sea—it sat only a few feet, it seemed, up from the water and a few feet back from where soaked black rock broke sharply away—and yet it was strangely immobile, as houses should be, as though it had taken root within the mountain of rock beneath it. It must be beautiful, I imagined, to see through a bedroom window the sky lightening from dark blue to grey, meagre evidence of the sun, as the turquoise sea revealed itself in morning light; and yet, the house was distant, alone. The trek up through hills and around cliff edges seemed difficult, barely comprehensible. The lonely spot of grey-roofed white receded from my view as we walked back towards the gravel.

In *Marienbad*, the feeling of distance between the two lovers on the balcony is palpable. She doesn’t trust him, doesn’t know him, scarcely even remembers his face, though he tries desperately to convince her of the reality of their earlier affair. The distance between the two lovers on a beach in southern Wales was not, for me, the stretch of land and endless sea, but the “he” next to me, as I became less aware of his story of the island and more aware of the island’s sea-stained edge withering away in the water. Back within the tiny, enclosed cinderblock walls of Lydia’s dorm room, the space between her bed and the one I had been lying on seemed insurmountably large.

To stand beneath a vast sky, upon an expanse of aged rock, is, for me, to recognize the transience of my own life, set against the hugeness and perma-

nence of the landscape. And yet, even within the compartmentalized smallness of the dorm room or the city street, the rock no longer wild and jagged but carved into exact rectangles of dull off-white or grey, the feeling of my own impermanence remains. When the walls of Lydia's room crumble and fade, in the distant future, into nothing but fragments of their original cinderblock, who will then remember the phone call or the seizure we saw from her window or the shapes we pressed into the beds as we lay for hours in the dim, warm light?

I am "so small between the stars," Cohen reminds me, so insignificant in an enormous, enfolding series of events. I am aware yet terrified. How can I acquiesce to being nothing more than an ephemeral fleck on a New York City sidewalk? How can I allow myself to be forgotten, as though I never existed, led to the slaughterhouse with all the other sheep; and yet, knowing the transience of my own life and that of everyone and everything I know, how can I expect not to be forgotten?

And yet I gather my own stories of the street and the sea and the dorm room and thread them together, linking the little stars that I live between, to make myself so small and so alive, if only for a moment.

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