

She stands in front of the crooked mirror. It droops down slowly, as a teardrop falls down a child's cheek. At any moment it could fall and shatter into the sink. The suspense amuses her.

There is a faint smell of wet sourdough bread lingering behind the shower curtains, creeping up through the floorboards. She crinkles her nose, her pale white skin folding like tiny snowflakes.

She turns towards the window for fresh air, but moves too quickly. A ray of sunlight pierces her eyes, and she staggers, relinquishing her head into the sink, and then choking on the hot, running water.

She dries herself, shuts the blinds, and walks toward the doorway, wrapping a scarf around her thin, bony neck. She slips into her tattered overcoat, marked by its holes and damaged seams, and leaves without locking the door.

4pm. A small figure, frail and lifeless, drifts down Church Avenue toward the towering giants of the financial district. The flow of the tide presses against her, the hurried retreat home after a 'hard day at work'. She evades eye contact; wearing a blank expression and the same outfit as every other night, black—to mask her porcelain skin. Her eyes face the wind, as it tangles her hair into a nest, turning it from golden blonde into messy silver. She squints. Shadows carve her path. She veers left to right, intent on not walking too fast; she has learned to never be too eager. But from a distance, her strides are unmistakable. Always too large and drawn out, not fit for her tiny feet and short legs. Never quite in a straight line. Her neck protruding out first.

She watches the daylight get dragged down behind the buildings. In the center she can detect a chimney, rippling out smoke in aggressive waves, slowly choking the sky. It whispers to her, *Goodnight*. Her face lightens; she is getting closer.

She imagines herself extending a hand, tugging on the cloud of charcoal, and like two magnets unclenching, it would peel away from the sky. It would slip down through her fingers in the form of coat lining, so she could hide her tiny bones away and not ever feel the wind. The corners of her lips curve slightly.

She reaches Trinity Place when the sky is turning from purple to grey, and the sidewalks are occupied with empty briefcases and wrinkled business suits. Masses of faceless bodies,

slouched heavy shoulders-- the familiar dreariness and dread of the evening commute. Exhaustion seeps through the cracks of subway gratings. Anguished engines of yellow cabs, sirens signaling nothing.

Cigarettes shrivel in the large, flimsy hands of men marching down subway steps. The collective strain in every small movement, each piece of matter contributing to the tension. Every night, just the same. She could close her eyes and see it all unfolding in her head with complete clarity, rehearsed to perfection. Like a scene from a movie her grandfather once told her about.

She waits impatiently for the crowds to drain out, for night to fall and the trivial white noise to cease. It does not come until many hours later. Until after she has traced her finger along each gradient of the stained brick wall; until she has memorized the position and angle of each slanted crack along the Cherub Gate.

She weaves herself in and out of the iron gratings that crisscross underneath the bridge connecting the back of the church to the American Stock Exchange. She passes the time by shuffling her feet in circles. Every so often, she strains her neck upwards to look at the far off faces, glowing from the back of the church's window.

The wind hits her from all angles. She determines she must be right in the middle. There, underneath the bridge, with the red brick wall crawling upwards on a slope, and the Trinity Church and its graveyard waiting at the top. Everything seemed to be oriented around this one square.

And it was, indeed, at the very center, sunken into the heart of a place that never seemed to acknowledge it. Like a black hole in the center of the galaxy, invisible, but all the same, exceedingly more powerful than other visible forces. A dark hole manages to keep the vastness of the expanding universe intact. Pulling on each clump of mass—bending light, distorting space and time. It stays alive through its appetite for dying stars. It exists by means of its hunger to consume compacted densities.

These dying stars release emblems from its rocky surface, coating the concrete in a light gold. No longer the fiery balls of gas they once were. She watches the city trample across these emblems, blind to their own self-destruction. And she looks up at the faint tip of Trinity Church, then up at the stars—floating above the surface of Manhattan's financial district, drifting like hollow spirits towards the center of the sky.

The night grows softer, and slowly she begins to awaken her ankles, her thighs, her wrists. She breathes deeply, expanding her lungs, to ensure that the smoke had left and silence had truly set in.

She walks towards the first street corner. Stopping again, to fill her lungs, pacing herself. As she rounds the corner, she begins to see more of the Trinity Church as its top stretches toward the bent moon.

The sidewalk grows more level with the graveyard. It is a strange juxtaposition. As if she is rising from beneath the surface to become even with it, while it is simultaneously sinking down to meet her. They converge somewhere in the middle, in front of Alexander Hamilton, as they always do.

Through the iron bars of the narrow black fence she stares out at the foggy landscape. A tableau of faded white marble—cracked and crumbling. A sea of tombstones. Carelessly staggered in uneven lines. Almost all are tainted black, burnt at the edges. The grass is dark green, jagged, sharp. The lawn is uncut, full of brown clumps, cluttered with fallen leaves.

She has the sensation of getting a paper cut just looking at it all, but she treasures that prick, for it brings life to her sickly white skin. The smell of decay makes her nose crinkle again. She blinks, brightening her brown eyes, momentarily turning them to a shade of milky lavender-blue.

She hears the bell ring. The streetlights in front of the American Stock Exchange illuminate the graveyard from behind, casting an orange light across the fallen soldiers. Like the shadow of a bruised, moldy peach. The grass bends in the direction of the light, the tips of the blades sharper than before.

The branches of the trees bend at bizarre angles, as if staged by a puppeteer dangling from a nearby skyscraper. She could almost hear the maniacal, robotic laughter. She tilts her chin up, as if to say, “I can hear you.” In return, the thorny, twisted arms of the trees reach down toward her spine, tickling and taunting, filling the back of her throat with scratchy lumps—drying her lungs. She grows paler; her hair shines with more silver. The whiteness of her skin begins to radiate through the blackness of her coat.

She keeps walking, turning onto the corner of Wall Street. The tombstones now face her. She stops at the gate, staring down at the bed of corpses, peaceful. Quiet. Undisturbed. Only a distant whispering. She mumbles under her breath. Reciting a list of names, searching for someone she had once known, as a dog digs through the piles of dirt in the backyard, trying to find the place he buried his bone. She squints before turning her eyes to the grand archway of the church.

A pillar of weary, disassembled dreams, for the girl who once thought that Wall Street was an exciting place. That the green toy soldier on her brother's nightstand was an emblem of possibility, memorializing all the youthful blisses of childhood. She had never realized how frail the plastic, the marble, and the unbreakable concrete could actually be.

Perhaps that's what she finds so comforting about the graveyard. Why she chooses to spend all her nights staring at nameless tombstones. Why she insists to her mother that she is always too busy to call, because she is dating a successful businessman named Jack, who takes her out to expensive dinners each night.

ii.

The bell chimes again, louder. A man in a white coat.

She does not flinch, only feels the emptiness of the wind crawling under the sleeves of her jacket, spinning small tornadoes around the tombstones. The grass bends again, harshly, like fingernails on a chalkboard, scraping away filthy layers of dust.

His shoulders bend backward, his chest opens wide, and his eyes start to water. She sees the reflection of herself: her sunken jawline and tiny shriveled nose.

She knows where he comes from. The peacefulness that had come so slowly, leaves quickly when he arrives. He radiates exhaustion. She didn't need to see the bruised calluses on his fingers to know he had been carrying the weight of a briefcase all day long. She knew the scent— ashtrays and sterilized metal. Wet metal.

He speaks softly, asking if she is here to see anyone. His voice is light. Dragged out syllabuses, longing to pull her in close. But she can hear only the screechy undertone of greed. Desperation. He wants something from her. That much in the foggy night is always clear.

She shakes her head. She looks down at her dirty fingernails. The branches of the bare trees become bones. Tortured by time, forced to remain there, crooked, as a memory. She feels

as though she is looking into a sad painting, in an overpriced museum that sells bottled water for double the price of a metro card.

He asks again, if she is here to *remember* anyone.

She squints. She had never known someone who had died.

Her lips turn blue. Her shivering skin thins like the leaves. She imagines the corpses sprawled out across the weeds and grass. The plaques buried, the world inverted, and then the glorious moment of her meeting the strangers she comes to see each night. Their lives becoming more than just fabrications built inside her head.

“My name is Sam.”

She turns to face him. She does not say hello, merely takes his hand, like a ghost fumbles to grasp hold of what’s tangible, like a child trying to steal a piece of the river in the backyard.

He does not say anything more. That, or she can no longer hear over the howl of the wind, the clatter of her teeth. His fingers are rough, and feel clammy as they cautiously wrap around hers. She feels warm in the presence of his grief. It is always this way. But the crawling sensation comes back when he moves closer. The shape of his lips reveals his true motive.

Soon, she can feel his hot breath steaming down the back of her neck. She turns impulsively. He begins to fidget, inch his way towards her, and she reflexively throws her arms up, replicating the figures molded into the side of the church. He understood, or at least pretended to.

She tries to direct his energy forward, past her. But the presence of the graves distorts the possibility for any sort of real, genuine motivation to do something on behalf of someone else’s well being. It turns actions into mere replications, the sky into a beautiful illusion.

They turn onto Broadway where the scratched sign reads “Canyon of Heroes.” She continues to resist looking into his eyes, and says “Sam” under her voice, attempting the intonation of someone saying “No.” But the word still frightens her, almost as much as saying his name.

Yet, it didn’t seem right to tell someone they can’t have something, in a place like the one they were in. It was as though, in that place, every syllable and every gesture was irrevocably immortalized. She could sense all the tombstones listening— burying the sounds, the cries, and

the howls. Sculpting the visions they saw unfolding in the foggy, deserted streets of night into stone.

She doesn't say anything more. When she turns back, some time much later, he has left, clearly unsatisfied. She is glad to be alone again. Her lungs open back up and her blood flow returns to a normal pace.

She finds herself again at the edge of the graveyard, this time setting down her things and holding onto the rail. Her scarf starts to choke her; she nudges it back in place, her fingers sleepy and numb. To the right of the church, the north side, the graveyard is more populated. The light is less prevalent, but she can see more. The untouched, narrow dirt path zigzags across the yard, the empty benches rest slanted on the slope.

Everything stands eerily still except for her fluttering eyelids, racing as they envision the possibilities of lives once lived. Those lives that once belonged to those that lie suffocating beneath the ground.

It is quiet, but she can hear the distant drone of car sirens in the dead of the night, the footsteps of those still treading home. Her lips swell, she reaches out a hand, to pluck the last leaf off a nearby tree. To save it from falling into the reach of the ravens. The ravens that come at dawn and pick at the slabs, devour the grass, shovel out tree roots, and buried candy wrappers.

Now the tree is completely empty: a light grey cobweb against the stony backdrop. She puts the leaf in her pocket, the bell rings again. The raven's yellow eyes pierce her pale skin, and she sloppily chases after her trailing scarf.

"Goodnight, Sam." She whispers, before turning towards the canyon.

iii.

The next night she returns, later than usual. She is tired. The pointed tips of the gate look sharper, she has some trouble identifying each grave from the next, and the empty benches are filled with sadness.

But still, she remains a pale sweetness in the dark of night. She squints, faintly distinguishing some tarnished lettering in the background, but after a while, decides all the tombstones, except a few, are just blank slates. The names, washed away, replaced with shades of black and grey. The only words: "NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE," radiate from across the street.

She sits delicately, cross-legged, searching in stillness. The tombstones sprout in threes, maybe fours, but never more. Rarely, is one ever alone. Except for the white marble man in the center, and Alexander Hamilton.

A shadow falls across her face, invading. He had made no sound in his approach.

“Hello, Sam,” she says, without turning her head.

Her lungs drown with water. She stares directly at Andrew Hamilton, again, memorizing each level, each curvature.

The man, tonight dressed in a red wool sweater, starts to say, “I’m not Sam.”

She does not listen, but instead, walks him toward the church, laughing silently, nudging him with her eyes as they bend around Wall Street.

He asks her if she works down here, and for what company.

She laughs out loud this time, the iciness in her voice piercing the stillness. She feels the maze of nameless blank slates immediately turn to her, accusing her of something. She resides to silence.

He pulls out a cigarette and tucks a small piece of hair behind her ear. She shivers. A bell chimes, and it seems her inattentiveness finally exhausts him. After he leaves, she calls out, to no one in particular, “Goodnight, Sam.”

iv.

The next night, a man passes her, barely stopping. Her cheeks are stained with tears. She says “W-a-i-t...S-a-m.”

She can’t find the one she is looking for. The grave must have moved, she is sure of it. The one that is smaller than the two beside it and has a crumbling exterior is gone. She panics.

He says quickly: “Who are you?”

She looks at the blank nameless slates. Up at the tower. She does not say anything. She turns to the statue in the center, asking for forgiveness. The yard roars, the ground trembles.

Sam is irrelevant, she tells herself over and over. He stands in her shadow, asking too much of her. But the strangers in the graveyard, they mean a great deal more. She is beyond just fascinated by them. She has maps of their lives recorded in her mind. She knows each tombstone by shape, can distinguish them by their cracks, their proximity to an empty bench, their distance from the curved path.

She longs to go past the gates, to climb to the top of the church, walk across the circular rooftop and look down at everything, rather than up. Her neck is sore. But instead, she slips her fingernails underneath the railing and spreads herself on the concrete floor, looking to see if she can find where the graves end and the bodies begin. Light flickers through multiple windows in the BANK OF NEW YORK building behind her, until there is only one remaining.

A triangular clock at the center of the tower reads 4am. A perfect circle has wound itself again, and half sleepwalking, tears crusted on her face, she retreats back home.

v.

The next night, a man in tight skinny jeans approaches her. She says, with the tone of an exasperated mother, "Sam, those must be suffocating you." He runs away, confused, with the energy of a fourteen year old. He drops his joint and she picks it up, examines it, and then piles some dirt on it, burying it beneath the perimeter of the fence.

She tilts her neck back again. Little windows of the church collide with one another; it is easy to get dizzy. She remembers the obstacle courses she would draw for herself with chalk in the backyard, beside the white daises and orchards. But now there is no chalk, only overgrown grass and fences. The streets extend down Wall Street to the water and then back again. There is never an end, no finish line, only the shadow of the next man. The next stranger appearing behind her with an empty briefcase, always plastered with the same far-off distant expression, his blistering feet sunken into the pavement, pressing on the edges of the tombstones, pushing them further into the ground.

Crosses, open circles, crosses, closed fences. Empty benches, barren trees. Whispers. Blue lips. Distant euphoria. Transparent. She swims home.

vi.

The next night, she arrives early, hoping if she sits inside the church until it closes, she wouldn't have to face Sam that night. She had run out of things to say to him.

The soft velvety red benches are a nice relief from the concrete that she is accustomed to. Her black dress does not rip that night, and her hands rest on her lap peacefully. She sits near the doorway; every few moments she is awoken by the cold breeze cutting across the back of her neck. She does not have her scarf with her; her neck juts out, exposed.



The wide-open arches, the ornate organ pipes, the ceiling—an endless array of openings and closings. Scattered bodies fill the rows. The windows, too dusty to see the hill of the tombstones outside. A figure sits down next to her. A man— aged and wrinkled. Her chin tilts downward to the floor.

“Hello, Sam,” she says under her breath. He does not seem to notice. She gets up, carelessly and distraught. She begins to drift towards the melting wax. The corner with the candles.

The world makes a prayer with her, for her. She is silent, thinking about her shadow. Thinking about Sam. All of Sam’s different faces, all the variations of his skin. The lights dim, everyone shuffles outside. She stares up at the Jesus on the wall, thinking of a vacation she once took to Rome and the sound of her mother’s laughter, a soft coo-coo, telling her the world was a beautiful place.

She whispers, “Goodbye Sam”. Hoping he had already left, and would not follow her, or somehow would just not see her at all. She does not listen to the bells; she feels her body becoming a phantom. She does not resist. Her thin neck gets even thinner.

She stops at a golden rectangle stamped into the floor in front of the doorway.

“In loving memory of...” she trails off, uninterested. Memories. Shoved into the ground, an old idea that inevitably drifts away through cracks in the window. A pretty picture on the shelf. An emptiness, cast behind her flickering eyelids. Trapped behind the thick iron doors of the church.

Another triangle. “Here stood the queen.”

An incomplete circle, a jagged edge, a rising moon. The silver pecks in her hair that shine in the eyes of the strangers she pretends to know so well.

“Revelation VI: versus 15, 16, & 17.” Inscribed in small print against the aging copper. A sickly green, *God Bless America*. The dusty portraits eroded away, the lives of those we only know through marbled sculptures, chipped and damaged.

There they all were. In the doorway. All the sorrows, the miseries, the longings, the greed, the triumphs, the sacrifices. Immortalized into small pieces of slab, built into an even larger piece that spends its day opening and closing for strangers. Offering small glimpses of things for us to hold on to, something for us to remember.

She passes the coffins. The ground had shifted through the years so that the edges didn't align any longer, and even from the street you could easily make out the black holes along the edges. Her stomach lurches. The massive cracks suck air out of her lungs.

Vague lettering: a C, a bent M, the line breaks off.

A phrase, a syllable, a spirit, a memory; drifting.

She stares one last time. Bodies without names. When walking up, the tombs are bigger than you. On the steps of Alexander Hamilton's grave, a small white flower. Stomped on by the ravens that come only at dawn. Everything yellow. Robert Fulton. The sign "Birthplace of Columbia University."

Birthplace? She can no longer see any sign of birth, except the births of small insects. Even the trees are dead. The buildings are not too far away now with their flashing lights. Their artificial pleas. Demanding that they are the life, the center. When it all is right here in front of her.

vii.

Without any form or shape, she loosens and falls over the fence. She crouches, breathless, behind Alexander Hamilton. Too distanced from herself to touch anything.

The face of a man glows in the corner of a cold, black stone nearby. The face of city, rising with the dawn. Green, naked, then yellow again. The triangular clock drags out each tick, suspending the moment for her benefit. The grass is softer than it had looked. She falls into the Earth, gently, a pool of snow and loose black garments.

She feels warm, smiles, and closes her eyes. Imagining herself running through an obstacle course in the graveyard, no shadows following her, no lure, no gravity pulling her towards the center. She only floats higher and farther away, until she eventually reaches the definite end. Crosses the finish line.

The bell chimes, but she hears only one morphing voice- insisting his name is not Sam. It becomes an echo, drowning out all other sounds.

"No I'm Jacob...I'm Alex...ark... Ste.....ert"

She interjects with her own whispers,

"Goodbye Alex, goodbye Mark, goodbye Steve, goodbye Robert."

The ravens come, swallowing each syllable. The light from the BANK flickers. Through the window she sees a silhouette of a man coming into work early, or staying late. The beginning and end is obsolete. She sinks down deeper, her eyes glowing green, the branches tangling her hair, her skin no longer pale, but a tan yellow. She repeats her goodbyes until she falls asleep. Too cold and sleepy to hear the rumble in her stomach, to feel the fear quake in her bones.

*And there she lay, oh Lady Liberty, look at her now. Won't you take her hand, raise it up high,  
and remember the day?*