

It only took 2 weeks after they told us they'd discovered another world.

They'd said that something, somewhere, had paid off. They'd answered the question, *the* question of where we went, of souls. Of heavens and hells, and there was no longer anything left to fear. They said they had proof (or close enough) and it was free. Free things sell faster.

Death was equal. It always has been. No matter where they went, who they became when they went there, or who they didn't. They all died the same, whether by their own hand or through the hundreds of services that popped up. Easy Transits was the biggest one. Said they'd had an employee go on up ahead, who had done all the prepping, and that there'd be comfort waiting for them. Despite knowing what was to come, some of us still needed that, I guess. Material reassurance.

2 weeks, and this world began to smell. The officials were gone. Your neighbors were gone. The Easy Transit Employees had locked their buildings for the last time before throwing themselves off of them, and then they, too, were gone.

The sun stayed. So did decay.

It only took 2 weeks.

I no longer need to sleep.

So I spend the daylight— and there's so much of it, hauling the things everyone left. There was so much frenzy at the end that no one could do much except throw things out, or box them in with themselves as they transitioned. That's what they liked to call it, because dying was something old, something broken. Dying meant ending, and this was restarting. This was shifting.

I believe in witnessing. There is no change without evidence, and someone has to tally up what was left behind. There's more of us, I know. I know. Sometimes I see movement, but we don't speak, because speaking is akin to shame, and none of us are ashamed.

When I'm not moving, or dragging, or breathing, the silence means I can hear everything. I sit in the room I fought a sibling for, the room I thought was always too small for the fight that preceded it, and I can hear electricity humming in the lightbulbs. I can hear the soft rush of the wind, delicate against the shingles of the house. In the day, when I lie on the bed that I don't need, a bead of sweat pooling on my temple, my hands crossed over my sternum, I can hear the sun through the open window.

It feels like a language I need to learn to speak. It feels like a language I could know. It feels like something I did know, before. When words felt like sounds underwater, and mouths seemed much too large.

The language the sun speaks sounds a lot like the ringing in your ears, deep underwater.

I stand on my porch, every day, when I'm too tired to drag anything else back to the house it belongs to, to the neighbor I've known since I was a child, and I learn the language. I scream back at the sun, until there's nothing left of my vocal cords, until I can spit blood into my hand, a tribute for the universe, and then I return inside.

I don't lock any doors, because no one will knock.

The house down the street has a grand piano, and sometimes, during the day, I stare at it through the window. I look up chord progressions, and I flex my fingers, though they're stiff and callused, and I wonder whether it's okay to take a house that belongs to no one, and, therefore, everyone. Is it okay to enter the memory of someone's life, brick by brick, or is it transgressing a boundary that death doesn't dissolve?

I don't enter, so I think I know the answer.

"There's more moths now."

She found me one day as I cleaned the leaves from the neighbor's pool, and she watched me for hours on end. She stood several feet away from me, and when I was done, she followed me home. I didn't lock my door, so she entered, and when I told her not to track any mud in, she left her shoes by the door. She stayed.

I find it hard to talk, now. I think language evolves, even as this world is left behind. When I look at the whorls in her ear, I see questions, and when I see the dry skin on her lips, I see syllables. But I do try.

"So?"

It was after she saw me talk to the sun for the fifth day in a row that she touched me for the first time. Her fingers, stubby and with chewed fingernails, traced down my back, and she told me she got it. She thought the sun was listening, too. How could it not?

"It must mean— something. That... listen, if there's somewhere we go to, it could be that this is somewhere people will find. None of us live in a vacuum."

I told her that she had to go to her house some days. Or it would think she was gone, and it would begin to memorialize itself. A tender auto-cannibalism. She asked me what that looked like, and I showed her the drooping eaves on some roofs, and the way doors seemed to splinter and crack, and not quite fit anymore. An abscessed tooth, almost, something sore and neglected and maybe even a little sad. She'd looked a little sad, then, but she had promised me she'd go back, and she'd touch the walls, and she would reassure the foundations. Someone walked here. Someone walks here.

"No. Maybe. I like the thought... moths. You know."

When she kissed me, I let her. It had been 2 weeks. We had existed a thousand years, probably. Or more. I wasn't sure when I'd last seen the moon. But that wasn't why. I kissed her back, because she was warm, a different-from-the-sun warmth, and I kissed her because no one could tell me not to, not even the sun. But mostly it was because I wanted to, and I'd almost forgotten what want was.

"It makes sense. What you do. The cleaning? It's for whoever's coming, or whoever is returning, or... just because you can, maybe. Because you're good. Because it's what's right."

She cut and braided our hair together. For the next few days, I startled whenever I saw her, in her almost bald form. She said I looked incandescent, and I said hair wasn't all that.

"I don't know about right. What you do is what you'll always do."

When she said that maybe it was time to move on, I didn't reply. How do you tell someone that you haven't closed your eyes in what might be years, or decades, or maybe just days? That there is something primal gnawing at your insides, telling you that to close your eyes is to give up, or maybe just to give in, and you've given enough.

So I didn't tell her. I watched as she memorialized herself, and she picked out clothes by walking into different households, and I bit my tongue with each lock she forced. I winced when

she kissed me, when she pushed me, when she screamed at me, but I couldn't tell her that I couldn't move. I couldn't.

Someone had to be the caretaker. Someone had to care. It was terrifying to think that we could leave behind an entire world and not care. So there had to be me.

On the last night, she said she had to show me something. So I followed, because I knew I'd do anything for her then. Just for those few hours, before she got what she wanted from the next world, or didn't. I couldn't know.

She took me to a house, and I knew it was her house. The door still fit in its frame, and the windows looked clear. Some windows, like eyes, get clouded, slowly, eventually, with loss. With grief.

Her house shuddered when she stepped inside, a reflexive inhale, something that seemed to say it was scared each time she went that it would be the final time. I took off my shoes, and I tried to tell it with my feet. I know, I thought, I know.

She led me through to the back yard, which had grass and moss and a swingset. She shook out an old, dusty rug, and she lay down on it, staring at me until I did too. When I looked up, I saw the most stars in the sky I'd ever seen.

She named every constellation for me, and I knew she'd made every single one of them up. She told me that soon she'd be on one of them, and all her house and I had to do was look up at them. She told me the world and the stars and every blade of grass was beautiful, and I told her I believed her. I always would. It was why I stayed.