

People were driving nowhere faster by the clock. I saw their lava river flow cut lengthwise, the stream of headlights like smelted gold, while the other way begot slag smoldering duller ruby. I've sat here for such a long time in the lonely weeds not suffocated by smog, watching my watch monotonously fluoresce before an unknown threshold automatically shuts it down. Then I turn it on again, and watch that metronome tick for a few more seconds. I sit here while the world goes around with its business, people chattering away to each other by whetting their fingers on birdcage wires.

*I woke up, my head pressed flat against the plastic sheen of my bony desk, to the symphony of grating and screeching furniture in the near distance. I shook off the drowsiness, crept past the rows of desks, and unhinged the classroom's side window. People were bustling outside, lugging tables and boxes overflowing with papers which flew out occasionally, but were hurriedly collected by a trailing man. I realized that today the students collected their class schedules. I remembered those old days, comparing each passing period while huddled next to peers, either excitedly anticipating a year of manic antics or cursing my bad luck. They swarmed in from every direction, like locusts come to roost in depraved gluttony. Crowding around the erected tables, they recited their personal information impatiently. I slunk through the window crevice and into a hall at the opposite side of the campus.*

Let me explain this exile which really is no expulsion but my own Walden. Whenever I talked to people in that distant past, my voice would become louder and more strident. I gained an unpleasant rankness, a mask for foibles. And the people laughed nervously, gleaned the chaff they could, and departed. And then my well stoked fire would subside to soot. So now I sit here by the highway and wait to carve a new inscription with which I could borrow fame. I walk through the twin tinder shafts and fancy myself the rustic wanderer. As I brush a blackened branch aside, I envision gun left dog right, letting mud coat my stiff shoes. I can sing as loud as I want and let the cars drown met out, maybe even dance away sanity.

*I must have fallen asleep again because the distant chatter suddenly magnified. And there were footsteps tapping, like a blind man's cane, towards the den of lockers I was slouched against. I sprang up and pretended to adjust my watch. There was a short gasp and the tapping stopped, but I continued to intently press my dial at random. After a few seconds, I looked up and saw a girl staring miles deep into her crumpled class schedule. I almost laughed at this*

*absurdity, but instead said, "I'm sorry, did I scare you?" She glanced up, looking everywhere except at me before replying, "No, I just didn't expect anyone here." There was a pause and she tentatively continued, "I hope I'm not bothering you, but I'm new here. Do you know where this classroom is?" I took the proffered paper and contemplated the indicated room. It was the same one I had spent the night in.*

*I said, "I think so," and with a sudden burst of boldness: "Let me take you there." She had evidently only expected directions, and looked alarmed for a moment before thinking better of it: "Thanks, go ahead." I strode ahead quickly, looking at her schedule all the time and ostensibly using it as a map while muttering directions under my breath. Eventually I returned to my dwelling, and proclaimed without looking around, "Well here it is, I hope I've helped." I almost hadn't expected her to follow, but she stepped in front of me and tried to peer through the glazed windows. Feeling that same recklessness, I stepped beside her and proposed, "You can see the inside too if you want to." The window from which I had exited was still unhinged, so I grasped it from the inside, lifted it out, and crawled through the narrow opening.*

*And for the first time, her demeanor thawed from cordiality and she laughed briefly. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked, but not pensively. "Why are you always so wary?" I accused light-heartedly, "You marked me out as some crazy guy stalking the halls as soon as you saw me." She blushed slightly, explaining, "I'm sorry, it's just that I didn't expect someone hiding out so far away from the crowd. It's nice meeting someone around here." She crept through the crevice too, and we sat next to each other, as though waiting for a teacher to begin his lesson.*

*We began to exchange the usual information, and I found my words spilling out in a strange flood; something opened up in those fleeting minutes. "When I'm running into the sunset, I'm not sure whether it's the dehydration or the Word, but this feeling of peace comes over me. Death never seemed so beautiful. Watching it all fade away; I could trace the bloody disk until it slips beneath the horizon, all the while daubing palettes of purple over the saffron. And even as my muscles feel like they are melding into the asphalt, it feels like I could go on forever." I paused and reminisced about these sweet memories before her delighted giggling broke the reverie. "What's the matter?" I asked, slightly irked. "Nothing, it's just any other person saying that would sound trite," she quickly answered, "But when you said it, you actually believed it. You were back running." Then, all too soon, she glanced at the clock on the wall and said, "I*

*have to be going." Desperate, I pleaded, "Can't you stay a little longer?" Already ducking her head through the crevice, she replied in a chagrined voice, "We'll see each other at school," before softening and adding, "Thanks for showing me around." I watched her meld back into the distant crowds, not bothering to close the window and instead figuring at my desk.*

Suddenly the golden blaze facing me thins out unexpectedly. One, two cars pass me in a single minute. I raise my watch and time the next car from speed limit post to writhing tree. Four seconds, but I have no idea whether that is normal. Perhaps I could average various times together to create a precedence, but as soon as that thought rises, the headlights blur together like fireflies again and burn against my retina.

*"Why don't I ever see you at school?" she pondered. It had been three weeks since I had first seen her, and we were walking together across the school track. People pounded rubber beside us, hawking their spit and choking on their desiccated throats. "Our classes don't follow the same paths," I plausibly explained, "And I have club meetings during lunch. Busy schedules and all that." She said nothing to this, but smiled slightly. "What are you smirking about?" I said, adopting an overly haughty tone. "Nothing, it's just that it's only been a month since that first time you snuck on me, but it feels like I can tell you anything," she teased.*

*"Accusing me of stalking?" I spluttered, and a sequence of light banter followed. When that line of dialogue dwindled, I injected, "Well, I don't really have anyone to tell your secrets to. And most of them don't even mean much to me." I was talking about the crushes she disclosed to me, both of peers and her own. She seemed satisfied with that, and said, "I should be getting home. Studying, work to hold down, you know the usual. You all right?" I had forgotten about all those disruptions she faced, and my distaste must have shown. "It's nothing," I tried to convince myself, "It's just that I wanted to take you out to the lake. It's my favorite place to go running. They had a kite festival there earlier this year; I could see them flying in the distance while the cords were obscured by trees. By the time I got there, most people had left and the wind had died. And all the kites were tangled up in the trees like a new tassel of leaves. I think it was to celebrate the sun coming back. Something like that."*

*"I've been meaning to go there for a while. It sounds nice. But I have schoolwork to do and other priorities. Take me there some other time." She broke off from the path, but not before she had patted my shoulder and tenderly beamed briefly.*

When I came here I brought several reams of paper and pens eager to flow secrets down them. Every now and then, before the sun is swallowed up by the horizon for its diurnal death, or when it is reborn from the ashes, I scrawl what little thoughts I have. I cannot work when the light and paper work together to blind me, or when my thoughts escape into the darkness, uncollected and not to be found. So I take what precious scarce minutes are left, though I am usually unable to blemish the purity of these unbroken lines and discard whatever I have over the concrete dividers.

*It began again. Pursuing her during school but always ducking out of sight or staring elsewhere when that face turned. Writing conversations on index cards and then tearing them apart for fear of my own sanity. It continued for weeks, waiting outside her classroom, and filling myself up with more of her. Until she asked one afternoon after school, "What do you want from me? You've listened to all my silly stories but you've never once asked anything back of me."*

*I didn't know what to say, only noticed that the summer sun suddenly burnt too intensely and was like a headlight approaching to cut me down. I didn't dare look at her, but felt her smirk and heard her say, "If you liked me you could have just said so, instead of dragging it out with these covert meetings." I tried to meet her eyes, "It's not just an infatuation. Don't degrade it like that. It's more than that. It's as if you made me aware of the need to struggle. It seems like I've just been stumbling through life with some pinholes for eyes before you came along. I don't know how to explain it without sounding like some sappy romance movie or pulpy book. How can I talk about feeling nervous out my mind every time I see you, not knowing what to say and then stumbling over my every word? Or having my happiness hinge on a single look?" I finally gained the courage to look at her again and she had become solemn. "Have you ever wanted anything for yourself?" she asked exasperatedly, "Don't go around being some slaving dog or my shadow. You don't have to tear yourself up like this."*

*"So what do you propose me to do?" I muttered. She threw up her arms in frustration and snapped, "What boys are supposed to do for girls! Ask me out for a date, invite me to eat somewhere! The important thing is that it's not just a coincidence that we meet, but that both of us agree to it beforehand." So I said, "Well, would you be willing to go out for a walk just with me tonight?"*

*"It'll be freezing!" she shot back, but the lightness had returned. "I'll bring a jacket, I'll bring a blanket, anything," I stammered. She cut me off, "It's fine. You're lucky my parents are out tonight."*

*"You'll do it?"*

*"Yes, I'm not sure if it's the smartest idea, but I don't even care anymore. See? Why didn't you ask me earlier? It looks like you've just seen the creation or something. Sometimes I wonder if you are only in love with me as some idea, some idol to be worshipped. Stop watching me like you're going to prostrate yourself before me. You're a strange one." We arranged times and broke off again. I ran like a madman, and when I had made a mile's mark I felt like whooping all the time, even as the breathe came hard on my lungs.*

I have buttressed myself inside these fortifications, burnt the drawbridge, and slathered mortar for crenellations. Still the world carries on, men never knowing the life they held. I try to be the sly fox that wipes his tracks clean, hiding the iron which girds the red bricks or the candid fate plucking her harp. When I gaze between the thorn and the thistle, I have the peace to sleep through the night. Until then, what more could I ask? These insomniac hours are the mere pittances I pay.

*I stood outside her house as the wind nipped at my extremities and flayed my flesh. I hopped around and dug my elbows into my sides to warm myself up, but I always stopped to pensively stare at the windows. As I began shivering again, I tried to grasp my attention with the bushes or asphalt glaze. These apparitions loomed at various distances, and if I thought too long, I'd be carried to another place unknowingly in the blink of an eye: one moment a detached mind facet and the next swallowing up my senses with their terrible formation. I tried to keep my shoulders down and align them by reprimanding them aloud. But my mind inevitably drifted the wind and they crept up subtly. I plucked a leaf from a tree draped in motley and rolled it in my fingers. The vein provided a futile resistance before yielding powder.*

*The curtains shuffled and I forgot my pain. A glance of that face, then the door opened. She stood there, shyly grinning. "Oh my God, aren't you freezing," she demanded. "No I'm fine." And I was. "So where are we going today?" she ribbed, " Hopefully someplace special."*

*"Don't worry, it's all planned out." She offered me her arm and I, nearly intoxicated, took her down the street and towards the school. "Are you serious?" she said, slowing down, "I've*

*been here often enough to be sick of it." I coaxed her on, reassuring her, "Just wait until we get there." I took her to my dwelling, and she tossed her head back and began laughing. "I see, an anniversary celebration," she understood. I opened the same window and entered halfway before elaborately offering my hand. "My lady," I flourished, kissing her hand as she grasped mine. She pretended not to notice and clambered in: "What have you done with this place?"*

*I had brought out all my books and laid them in arrays. "This is where I live most my life, reading literature that transcends the dull realities of life. It's here that I feel safe and here where the meaninglessness becomes my comfort." We sat on the cold tiles and ostensibly huddled together for warmth. "You really threw yourself into this, didn't you?" she remarked, "When I say this, it gets done, but without it, you would just wither away." And then we were chatting again, and her laughing and flinging her arms around me and leaning her head against my shoulder until I was nearly blind.*

*When we were subdued and listened to the wind come shrieking for a few moments, she suddenly spoke again: "Whenever it is dark, everyone's guard always goes down. Even the most repressed people start opening up, but when we wake up the next day, things remain the same despite this new knowledge." I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer without resistance. "Are you suggesting something?" I asked, distracted by the nectar wafting from her hair. She nestled closer and replied, "I don't really know. Haven't I already told you everything in my inane life? Well, that boy at school, did I tell you that he talked to me in class today?"*

*I knew she was trying to make me jealous and my heart acquiesced automatically. I burned with hatred for some person I had never met. But I tried not to betray a flicker of my face. The night was still yet to fall, and the reddening sky gave me the courage to blurt, "Let me tell you something too. All this time, I've never gone to school." She didn't stir, only said, "I've guessed that a long time ago. And here I am with some chronic truant," before closing her eyes. "It's not just skipping school though. I never go to it. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not tethered by all these useless classes and I can go where I want. Do you know what it's like being able to choose where to spend every night, alone?"*

*She moved away to look at me. "Are you telling me you're on the run or something? Why aren't you living with your family? Where can you go without your parents?"*

*"You're not listening! Can't you try to put it in your own eyes, try to see the liberation? Why look at me like some filth?" She flinched as I became more agitated, covering her mouth and backing away slowly before speaking her next words in a low tone: "I wasn't trying to condone or censure what you do, but you need help. I'm sorry, maybe when I asked about your relatives, I was just being incredulous. But I care about you and I don't want you throwing your life away just finding shelter. There are places you can go. you don't have to live alone."*

*"I still don't think you're listening. You think me mad but what is that to everything everyone else does? And all I need is you right now."*

*"This is exactly what I mean! What do you even see for us? I feel that whatever I do you would write odes. Maybe you've done that already. I like you, but I can't always be your Elgin Marbles. How long can this go on, lovely as it is? I think I loved the idea of loving you too, but now I know this has to stop."*

I have been here by the seasons. Winter hurls it sparse and brown, the grass wilting into thin paintbrushes and soaking up the brown pigments too. But as spring comes, the first rains churn up the mud, slaking emaciated rills first before collapsing their sides. The first green swathes the hillsides before being dotted by yellow petals. And summer causes the sun to render the roads like a boiler, almost like lengths of licorice laid out lengthwise. These changes come only when I have become enamored with the current one.

*"Let me take you to the lake," I cried desperately, trying to find something to mend these ties," Let me show you what I have seen." I grabbed her hand and she snatched it away. "Can't you see that you drive everyone crazy?" she furiously hissed, "Maybe if you stopped setting yourself up for failure. Maybe if you took the time to tear down your wall of tomes and actually live." She expounded every maybe and possibility, but I still stood there, unable to say anything that could halt her fury. And then she began to speak in the most terrible tone, the stain of aloof courtesy: "Would you be so kind as to take me back home?" I sighed heavily, turned a loving eye towards the deteriorating sunset, and pushed open the window for her. She crept through without brushing another inch against me and we walked the rest of the way in silence. Leaves swirled around in skittering streams, the multitudes shushing the world into silence.*

*I didn't pour out any more words. And she never turned back, never slowed her pace until we were back her house. "It was nice meeting you," she stiffly spoke. She trembled suddenly, and*

*I waited for the same softness to reclaim her. But she just gave a wan smile and slipped away, out the door and past my window without turning back. I didn't move. I was convinced that I had seen this moment from the very beginning. Each excuse for a walk, each glance that flew to other objects had all led to this. And now there was nothing to do about it.*

Look, already the sun is beginning to raise its tortured head up. I go back to my roughly hewn trench and fish for paper and pen. I remove the rock weighing these skittish sheets down and let a few fly, cooing softly as they lose all shape or form. I'll watch from my perch and look at the twisted wreck of a recent accident. The injured too far to help, people caught in their own spheres while making premature sepulchers. I would write, but the fog and the damp would blur my ink blots...