

shrike



means sword of the libertine
common squab in flight
magpie rumours
peacock game

in general, the stench
throats taken for granted
breaking bread
over failed taxidermy

[the thorns] had been a forewarning,
worshiping the skinless
asinine
broad-boned
gods of girls
who still believed

softer deaths

weigh
as

love



1.1 – Preparing for flight

For a long time I had wanted to write a story of vengeance, but I couldn't pinpoint where the impulse stemmed from. No—that was wrong—I was just unsure where it led.

But it took me to places of pretend. Places where I once again could feel like you, though walking into these masquerades was like an egg walking onto a hot pan.

I was very vain, of course.

I remember you said: Birdy, your hair is so unruly, but it frames your eyes just right.

So when I brushed it back to tie it, perhaps I felt a little disingenuous. I ruined your portrait.

But I was doing my research pretending to be inconspicuous. To write what—an expose? And went to the seediest places in the city, like we used to, donning the “garbs of the hedonists,” because we were very colorful.

I walked these aisles, saw myself in the mirror,
suddenly rugged,

And felt suddenly that rather than the uniforms of our youth, I'd worn the costume of your killer.

1.2 – The Bird

Five consecutive hours of prayer without falling asleep is certainly worth at least a night of—I flinch—sin.

Don't know what was wrong with me, sneaking out the halls without a candle. I wandered by feeling my way against the bubbly, unsanded walls. I used to fantasise of blindness, of total omniscience in spite of circumstance.

At the end of the hall: our old costume closet. Tonight, I am a detective. So I must don my pinstripe vest, my newsboy hat—I cannot relinquish it for anything—and leave tufts of my hair stylishly revealed behind. I strap a holster round my thigh.

And the most important thing for it: my gun.

It felt oddly weighty. A rattle, when I held it, surely to produce a nice effect for the audience.

I didn't know if it'd fire. I aimed not to test that hypothesis in this building. I stuffed it—at first, jamming it precariously, then rethought my passive inclinations toward mortality—and slipped all of it into my holster.

Whatever.

Ten P.M. is when Madame Faye checks on the younger girls upstairs. So once her footsteps pass overhead, I creep down the stairs, preferably as quiet as possible, before taking a vengeful leap at the end. The night air is cool, and the city is alive.

Tonight, I am a detective.

Two streets down—our opera house residences stretch thus far—the bouncer puts his meaty palm up against my chest bone. “Aren’t you too young?”

I cannot expose my voice. It is always a gamble.

“He’s my guest,” offers the barkeep. Ah. The bouncer lets me aside. We slip into the club, cool and calm.

I flash him the bird. Which him? Both.

Barkeep says, “you paying with stories again today?”

I say, “I got a gun.”

He puts his hands up, but his wide grin exposes all. So I say, “That was just the once.”

He says, “Good to try new things.” And hands me a whiskey with a few nuts at the bottom.

I say, “You kidding me?”

He says, “well, I don’t know your inclination.” But he’s a liar. It’s a gentleman’s club, and I’m a gentleman. Obviously.

“I’ve got a few nuts of my own to offer you,” I retort.

“You’re too generous,” he says, but keeps at it. Whole smiling face beautiful as a trout. So I have fed his humour, and hate myself for it.

I would leave the barstool, but Saturday has packed us in. The second floor, anyway, has the best view of all. And I have made it my goal to not let the filth shield my gaze from the limelight.

Thump. And the drum skips.

A four.

A three.

A four three two one.

I look. Because it has begun.

Because tonight, I am a detective. I am fresh-in-the-face but have my wits about me. Twenty two, and on my third case. Lonely, but understated. My name, pounding in my heart, is something Gideon-serious, but more like Joe when asked. Only a little afraid.

I see you.

1.3 – Peacock

The song tonight: oozing, militant. Last Saturday, they did the jingly jangly money song. Tonight, they sing like their fingers are pulling a full turkey apart skein by skein.

I sip the whiskey because Gideon-Joe isn’t frivolous enough to drink champagne or ask for a not-joke drink. I imagine myself taken apart by the sinew. Me and the barkeep both looking—I know because he’s shut up.

I know he’s staring at their thighs, and I’m thinking of being raw turkey.

He feels it. He says, “help educate a fool, Joe. Are you affected by this?”

The song melts. Goes: tut tut tut ta-taaa on my tongue. The bass walks all over my shoulders and I try to stay above it. I feel like Lady MacBeth unsexed. Chairs bend forward with the chairs onstage, all stepped on, tilted, caressed, and poised.

I do not, I think. Long tapping legs march forward, twisting extremities. It's all very grave, I think.

One woman smiles at a guest. I suddenly become too aware of my voyeurism from the second floor and look away. That way, I have lost the game, and the barkeep smiles, as though I've revealed my desire.

"It's all very much," I say, ahead of myself.

"Can't be that you're here to make titillating conversation with me."

"Of course."

He grins. "Then you can cede your case. The verdict is out. You're as much a pervert as the rest."

"No," I spit. "No." Twice means he should stop. Means he's won. I sigh. "No."

A great clatter. The tango ceases. The bassline stops before crossing the road. A dancer falls down.

I look at her. We all look at her. She picks her knees off the ground, her dark, cropped hair's fallen all over her eyes and nose and mouth. No—she can't get up. Her limbs are a pile. She looks up—her lace glove caught in her ankle. She takes full inventory of her shame. I meet her eye.

I see you.

It takes another shorter dancer to come over and heave, arms wrapped around each other, until the silent stage clears.

—And returns, sashaying like nothing. The audience slowly clap again. The shorter dancer allows them to revel in her, walks into the tables like water finding a path. The limelight cranes to find her skin, but the angel is among the people, placating the masses, her fingertips kissed. There is no need for music.

The ugliness that grabs me is a disease I cannot name.

1.4 –

Five taps on the table is "time to go." That I'd fallen asleep drooling on the bar table, and Gideon had fallen away to reveal...something feeble.

The barkeep peers down at me. He's leaning in. I sit up severely and my heart beats in my skull. Too late, he says. Only the old perverts are still here now. Even the dancing girls are gone.

He says, too gently, I'll walk you back. I ignore him and ask for my hat.

I hobble from L'Huître to the riverside to throw up. I must join the rats. Odd west the moon teeters on setting. The ebbing river, the oozing night, it all stinks. My optimism evaporated.

I take the odd way back to show I'm not afraid. I take full view of the quaint benches and lampposts affront me. I count the alleys and rags on the ground. I take inventory, because the city is mine.

Five streets past the gentleman's club. Five from the lane with hawkers' balconies. A mouse skitters. A whisper from the aisles. Hush hush.

My mouth dries.

"Cough it up. I've waited."

"They didn't pay me tonight."

"I'm talking a month ago." A deep silence. The woman murmurs: "I couldn't draw it up."

"Five hundred Lire. It's not a lot." Hush hush. "Or I take it out of you other ways."

It is quiet.

"Go ahead."

A thump and muffled gasp.

I rattle. A heavy thud above my thigh. The sound stops. The night rustles. I remember this.

Caught entangled in a damp alley.

No use hiding. Limbs move. Out of the shadows, into the fray. My hands, liquid, grasping a prop pistol. Tear away.

Ripe man affront me, in the damp dark, eyes bursting with recognition—

Earlier I was a detective, and now, god of death.

My hand shakes on the brink of sobriety. His peppered beard catches moonlight. He detaches from her. His fear—washes over me.

I raise two hands. Elbow pinstraight in front of me. I wield power.

"Don't," comes soft. As though meant not to be heard.

I dare look beside him.

I see you.

The same swooping nose. Lips ajar, then thinning into a seam. Eagle eyes that hold the night. But there was never a wrinkle in your eyes. Of smiles unpracticed. There was never fear.

My mouth dries up at the tip of your name.

Where have you been?

My city shrunk to the size of a pearl. It bursts. I stumble, unused to the force, my palm searing with sweat—I can't tell you who was to blame. I borrowed your force. The man, his face twisted in agony. Real pain. Real satisfaction. His blood oozes. I see you.

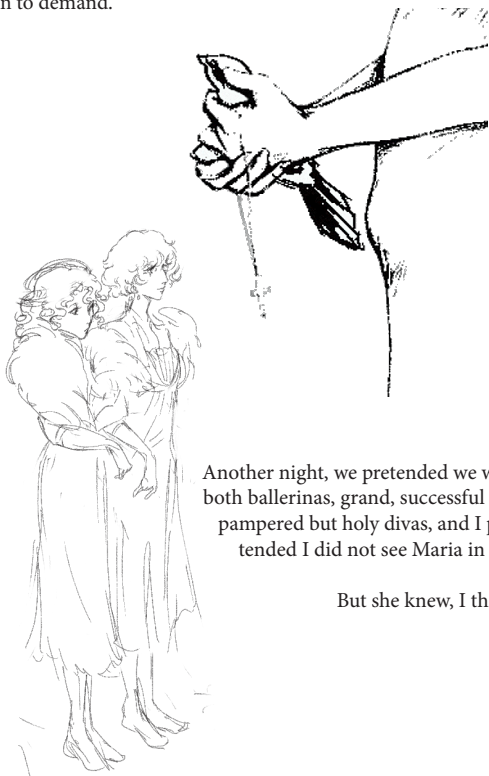
The night falls with a thud. What a dark sky.

You, walking toward me, but your footsteps have changed rhythm.

2.1 – Because I remember.
Because I dreamt it.
Because I'd seen.

Manon says: "Who do you want me to be tonight?"

Tonight, we are pretending to be queenly. Which means ignoring the loud laughter and banging walls from next door. Which plucking from each other's hands a squab we snuck upstairs from the party. Which mean we allow ourselves to be peacocks, all the while ignoring the pulses against our ribs before they begin to demand.



Another night, we pretended we were both ballerinas, grand, successful and pampered but holy divas, and I pretended I did not see Maria in her.

But she knew, I think.



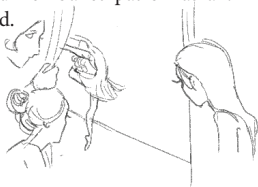
She had the same eyes
which unfurl into your soul and make you see death.

The same judgment worked into bones folded neatly pretending to be slovenly. I wanted to see Maria again. I wanted to see her, alive or dead. The night felt too ancient.

Manon was soft as plume. Maria could pretend she was. She was drawn like a taut bow. Hard as a mountain and just as cold.



In life, she had loved nothing more than her craft. She could hardly pretend she loved her ballet patron at all. Had him around her finger, she said.



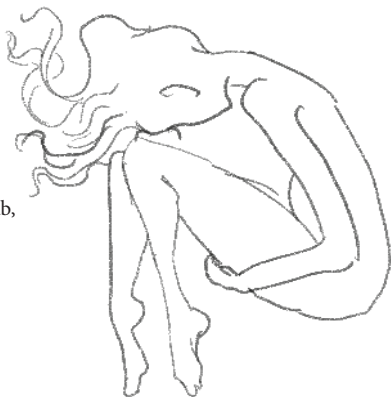
She was always on the brink of everything. A girl perpetually fitted back onto training wheels. She never quite understood.

The first time I met Manon I had wandered the cobblestone streets
sad, moonshone from the gentleman's club I snuck into and that
she worked in. Seeing her feigning stone in front of harassment,
as though she accepted her fate, I panicked. Clumsily mettled with
that prop gun,

just trying to scare him off,



but, seeing the spray, I was so jolted,



remembered the bathtub,

and fainted.

In general, the stench was so horrible it hung in the bathroom for days. And though girls have thrown themselves up there before, we were hard pressed to make this vomit last. That certainly, if we each held a chip of her ghost we could piece together one whole Maria.



in general, Maria sat by the windowsill at practice
her sheets rumped still
I wanted to lay into the crevice
but her shape was so different from mine



I wanted to see her corpse
I wanted to know how ugly it really turned out
I wanted to see if tear tracks marked her
I wanted to know if the lights struggled before it went out
or went silently like a defaced statue of venus
I pretended to care about the morbid things if it got me closer

the janitor got to her before us all, and by morning Maria was soap
suds down the drain.

the night before her death maria sat on her bed with her last pair broken. her patron would never help her replace her shoes again. her ankles, swollen, twisted. the fabric pulled off her belly round as a drum. and I refused her.



THIS IS WHAT YOU ARE, BIRDY. YOU HAVE GOT THE IMPRESARIO TO ADOPT YOU SO YOU DO NOT SCRAP IN THE DIRT LIKE DOLLS FOR THE REST OF THEM, BIRDY. THAT'S THE COLD TRUTH. YOU CAN DRINK THE MARROW! YOU CAN EAT THE INSIDE OF LITTLE BIRDS' SKULLS! YOU CAN HAVE THE WORLD AND NOT TOUCH A THING. DON'T PRETEND FOR A SECOND YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME WHEN YOU NEVER EVEN HAD TO PRETEND!



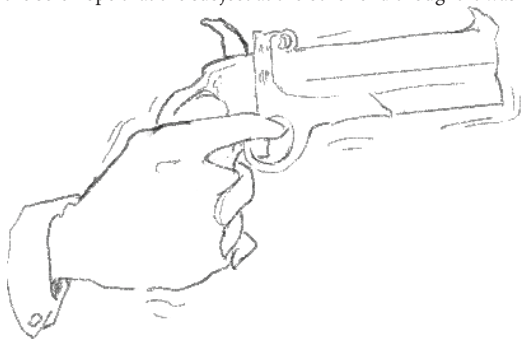
and all the nights after, believing too deeply in the words of the dead, I began to live with my life tucked between my legs.

angry, knowing I had soft power, but not the abonnement's.
so I pretended I was one of them, and looked the part.



but that cold night, even if I'd at first thought I saw Maria, I knew for
the first time in years what I was to do.

I looked afraid. My hands were shaking. I was helpless. I was banking
on the sole hope that the subject at the other end thought it was real.



I reneged on my premise. There was some good in
pretend: I was a protector at last. I was a man.

I was neither drunk nor blind.

You will find that I was always clear-eyed,
and that when I shot I aimed mercifully for his left arm,
and that I marked myself her hero,



and I was.