

## Lido

by Lily Selthofner

I wallow in toxic waves and long for unswimmable waters. Always just out of reach, out of control – born in fruitless, putrid, knowing worlds. Unruly seas steer my boat, overboarding passengers into stormy depths. Treasured mysteries lie on my floors, asleep in the canal beds. I watch from above as you sink into my muddy secrets and count on my fingers until your ascent– hoping you can hold your breath long enough.

People meet eyes in different ways, exposing and obscuring. Ancestors creak the doors in our mind-homes, to peek between living blinks. We toss glances and smiles like dice onto the cobblestones of insignificance.

I change landscapes by keeping divine self promises. I leave trails of gold-thread infinity, wading with strangers in my waters through the seas which once drowned me.

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## Venice

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I woke up on the Lido, cold and sunburnt. The elderly couple looks past me, surprised I am still here, still topless. Their little dog comes running. A wiry leg hair grabs my attention and I lose my fingers, wrists cramping in the dumb, null struggle.

The next day my skin cracks. The beach is more crowded, less pensive. I wear a taupe bucket hat that I'd bought from a street vendor. Underneath, cat eye sunglasses

cover my eyes. Deeper inhales don't always exonerate. Surveillance emerges from every seagull and wood knot in the brush. I cower and buck, exfoliated.

I am inconspicuous— my stoic, hidden face and exposed chest, fertile yet lifeless as a limestone statue. Uninviting yet alluring. No true eyes to meet, the world's attention instead cakes to my skin, dirty, scabbing over. I pick at the pits and grooves, scarring— acid rain stone exterior, eroding into glass bead dust. My fingers dig tranced agendas and unpronounceable numbers into the sand, forging spaceless maps in grain— light layers on my skin and little dunes around my beach towel.

The crisp, salty water takes back little lifetimes in every lulled wave, leaving my raw skin newborn and exposed. The ocean foams at my ankles with the freshness of forgetting, catching dry sand brushed off between lifetimes. Particles of chance swim in and out of the sea, delusions of microcosmic attention, time granulated and effort dissolved, swimming at my ankles. I drift between sand and water, repeating the cycle. In shallow oscillations, shells wash like rose petals along the shoreline. I pick one up, trace its receptive crooks, and set it back down again— overwhelmed by the beauty of the many and the futility of choice, chance— blind and undecided.

My goggles have a nose piece. I am afraid the knowing water will rush into my sinuses, flush out my obsessions, taste my nothingness and spit me back out, unworthy. Caught, dying pearls drown in baths of rippling metallic sadness poured from my starved, rusted chalice. Nevermind my protective facade, the nosebleeds inevitably gush in. Welling blood pulsates against the frame of my goggles and overcomes my vision. I suffocate, gasping through thick primance as I unsuction them from my face. The polluted, jealous air gushes into my nose, bites my brain and drinks my blood. Drips it down my chin and neck for pleasure. My eye-shot spots of reborn curiosity sink into the sand in maps of probability, of helixian signatures sponged

into tiny elements. My fingers roll in wine red corpus, blood drawn, and smear it in my journal.

I am a child in an adult body, wading into lukewarm pleasure. Deeper than expected I stand on my toes. With the great ferality of the waves, I flip and twirl, in flow.

### Raphael

I see the blurred aura of a man looking at me from afar. He is ageless, faceless, bearded— freshly emerged from the water, a new architecture of the sea, untouched. The same ocean circles his waist where it drags across my exposed chest. He calls out to me; I continue flipping. Spectacle, embarrassment— not sure if it's too late to respond. The magnetic water answers for me— he approaches, calls to me in Italian.

Closer he is beautifully fallible, with delicate soft skin and eyes as blue as everything around us. His charismatic joy swirls magic into our little auric pool, ocean dreamscape convergence of infinite horizon. He is singularity as movement, reverberation of a harp string. He is a pillar in the floods, unrelenting as the world shifts around him, waves redirected in satin pulses. I smile to myself, happy he's only a few years older than me, timid in his gentle enthusiasm, tidal hug.

Plastic swims past us. We collect it— grime holed up in my hands even though his calloused grip towers mine. A tiny school of fish dances between our legs, tickled brushes against our thighs. Hardly visible amidst encroaching reflective ripples, they could fit in his cupped palms. We examine them, faces inching closer. They're silverfish.

Like stars, their gleams usher cosmos; I ask him what gods he worships. He smiles as he squints nostalgically into the sea's horizon. He answers slowly, quietly, as

if he's reciting faint whispers that echo between atomic chords, first embers of incarnation, hints from his source— worshiped nature, true art in the beyond physical. His hands are free to touch my cheek, pausing, reaching beyond his monolith verticality and into my divine pull and rotation. He softens, drifts backwards, recounts bits of his childhood in Kosovo, across the Adriatic and inwards. He says Albanian is a difficult language to learn, and that the beaches over there have waterfalls— palms cupped, water jumps down, back to itself from his tallness, silver glitters.

We promenade between the upper-shore trash can and waist deep rolling water as we collect stories and garbage. The gentle waves topple us closer. I invite myself into his psyche, crystalline. He splashes me. He is angelic, menacingly perfect, unreachable yet enthralling, the cracked door of an open stranger. I offer him a swimming race, and he offers me a kiss.

### Federico

Federico was a hairy man, with a small head and red shorts, treading in passive nerves between sand and sea. His kind hazel eyes stood still, too scared to push or pull, time taking toll on his fractured mortal stature, shoulders heavy. His blind, stagnant taste for me flooded around my femininity; rendering putrid my one precious youth.

The red sun possesses my back in the place I can't reach— I have never let go of anything. I lean inwards, towards whispers that seep into my stoic brooks. I trickle and writhe, taking firm root at the earth's core, feet in wet sand. I venture into my paranoia, glimpse through gaps in its thick fog. Man may follow, passive, like a

memory. His distanced, gray silhouette hovers back there, incomparable to my Plutonic strength.

Goggles donned, I am hiccuping between breaths. My mouth catches air at the surface between each hurried front flip, in a race against my land-bound mortality. He swims to me, approaching slyly. He is athletic and unmoving, waves stronger. I drift away at the same pace, reluctant, yet we converge.

He offers me a ciao and sunscreen, the second of which I passively decline. He is funny and inquisitive, timid sun rays peeking through clouds of temperate fear. We talk, whipped by the shallow yet forceful waves that push us over again and again, tossed around and ungrounded. I accidentally touch his foot. He extends me his hand.

From the Veneto, he lived in London for seven years— a master of the English language and Italian cooking. He works at a restaurant called *Due Spade*. Two of swords— I am blinded, silent, undecided. My body is the scale, choosing life paths to sail as phantasmic ships, only saluted from the shore. The others are laden with gold-thread treasure, perhaps sinking in their routes, in the heavy luxury— suffocating fulfillment of having been chosen. Indecision is a decision.

On the beach I offer him my notebook with soggy, magnanimous fingers. Regardless of whether anything is worth knowing, the teal ink, once inscribed, bleeds into nothingness at my first touch. He writes his number, long since drowned in red and written over, while I shake hands with his salt and pepper haired coworker, esteemed. I kiss Federico's hairy cheek as he kisses mine. It's past my time— I leave the Lido, never texting.

Raphael

He sends me messages, idle and eager, during his lengthy commute to work by train then vaporetto each day. A server at a restaurant in Castello, close to my home, he brags, almost enviable. A few times a week, I come and go along the main road, wading past mini markets and tabaccherie. Sometimes I stop by to give a glittered hello, wanting a smile. I would text him just before I passed, and scan for him, recognizably tall amidst the restaurant's cluttered outdoor seating, orange chairs and large-windowed facade, bar behind glass. In slow, almost exasperated moments his eyes would soften to see me, shoulders relaxed and tired, charismatic smile asking "*Come stai?*" Other times he entertains me politely but rushes around me, sees past me, apologetic. As we age with our love, I opt to hurry past the restaurant at a distance, with quiet, quick steps and face hidden behind my tote, wishing for invisibility.

I prefer instead to see him in the dark satin privacy of nocturnal Venice. I often wait for him at the foot of the bridge between Castello and Saint Elena around midnight to see him after he finishes work. Confined by circumstance, we only exist in abstract, vacuum moments, teasing loves bites in broken tongues in the quiet corners of anonymity—having neither time nor space.

Sometimes we get lost in translations under the obscuration of tired moonlight. We laugh wordlessly into each other's eyes, catching glimpses of the gods between our waves of inner heaven, almost understanding. Other times we fit together—our quirks jugged, tranquil seashell grooves spooning in the sand. We float outwards like flowers swept along fertile waves, carried by a nostalgic breeze towards the far side of the horizon.

Tonight he swims my depths and collects my treasures on a red bench in the park. We almost disappear into midnight fervor. Our whispers, mouths close,

invigorate the foamy seas that beat in our aquamarine gazes, catching the evening between our tongues. I tease him with words hardly said, our faces come closer as I straddle his waist and press into him. I hold the back of his neck, pulling him in. My hair falls over our faces as we kiss in ablaze passion. His desire caresses my body, his firm grip reaches under my long skirt to squeeze my bare thighs. We speak in Italian, in heavy, wet, exasperated breaths. He bites my lip so hard that I feel the fossils of his teeth in my mouth the next day. I will chew the spot, longing to finish what has begun.

Weeks accumulate on red benches and in quiet dead ends. Between kisses, I catch drops of his bitter impatient tones on my tongue. Rawness catalyzed— our combination sparks in a burning heat if lingered upon too long. Acidic unstable boldness, our tangent oddities erode his once-sharp marble idol, sculpted in my mind. I feel his rough face on my soft thighs. We are mortals in decay.

### Serafino

*“Il sangue della madre”* — the blood of the mother. The first drop of red meets my words on the page. Fingers feeling underneath my nose, I sigh to myself and dig through my bag for paper towels. Finding none, I hurry instead to grab my watercolor papers. I tip my face over them and watch as a lazy pile of blood accumulates, dripping inches above the page, blank and pure moments ago. I breathe through my mouth— bubbles of wet air, my blood-choked throat coated in the metallic snare of life leaking. My eyes water as silent, simple red form, unrelentingly metronomic, escapes my body. I dip tired fingers into my pool of dark wine, now sticky, heterogenous, filmic with decay. My water bottle is almost empty, I’m

dehydrated. Blood drips slow in step with the setting sun as I pinch the bridge of my nose.

Through the clotting I smelled the smoke of a nearby fire. Against the flames I see one man depart from his small group on the upper beach, heading towards me. His little silhouette grows closer: every part of his body is muscular; his smooth, rounded biceps in trifecta with his mature, bald head. My eyes follow his calves— his whole body comes into frame as he squats next to me, ocean roaring behind.

“*Is it blood?*” he asks as he picks up my painting, before realizing the danger— yelping “*pericoloso!*” under his breath as he drops it. The paper gently sails down in the evening air and settles where it was. Destiny rearranged by micrometers, blood clean from my abyss, contaminated with future, with uncontrollable co-creation. Little bits of sand stuck in my fresh ink, forever now. Art my finite heart beated, labored to expel from the void and into creation, fingerprinted by every stranger, every breath, every gravitas chance.

He’s thirty seven, and comes to the beach after work every day to see his friends. He relays that I’ve been here often enough that the beach regulars have taken notice. I suppose he thought it was time I was introduced. “*Vogli fumare?*”

“*Senza tabacco, si.*” He invites me to their fire to smoke. Eager for weed, even though I’m already high on edibles, I expeditiously pack my half-dried blood paintings, stacking them between blank sheets. I drove my damp, sandy towel into my bag and strolled towards the fire, feet dragging in the sand, my mind still lost and eyes still glossed in artful trance.

Five of his friends sit around the fire, listening to music, too loud. They stare at my mystified figure, obscured in smokey overwhelm, my skin softly highlighted in small flames and crescent moonlight. The man sitting in the dilapidated lawn chair,



tilted away to escape perpetual smoke, rolls a joint. He's the youngest— my age, with short hair and dark, smoldered green-gray eyes.

The paper is packed and twirled with such slowness, as if time himself was rolling all of the universe's patience, bundled to smoke, inducing eternal sleep. She nestles, condenses into a long singularity at the center of the map she created, that we float along like corked bottles across oceans— pushed towards the horizon that ends between iris and pupil, unseeable. As he rolls I introduce myself, tentatively joyful amongst my new friends.

We are excited for newness, creatures of night and fire with orange, blaze reflecting eyes. Backs leaned against the comfortable hug of evening, we sat on massive driftwood logs long ago dragged upshore, and shared stories. Once the now-lit joint, passed around, reaches me, I unassumingly inhale. My chest extends upwards as I examine the filter—I see thinly cut strips of tobacco poking out the tip and behind the translucent paper. I smell it in the smoke and pretend I don't feel the first licks of its quick rush into my lungs, already en route to my brain. I feel the first nauseatingly orgasmic second of nicotine, and pretend it's just the weed. I exhale quickly, before it reaches the bottom of my lungs, and try not to inhale any more. Frustrated, I shake my head and quickly pass the spliff. I had explained and re-explained that I quit smoking tobacco. I made it known. Maybe the message fell on obdurate ears; perhaps it was a misunderstanding. I was not responsible, and I learned not to smoke things I didn't roll myself.

Dazed and unprocessed in the later night, I decide it's best to leave. I walk clockwise around the fire, in mild body shock from the naive invasion. Along my languid exit I pause briefly to chat with the man who has the most peaceful aura. Older and smiling, he scrolls through his instagram account, showing me pictures.

He's a chef, he beams with pride as I nod along to his gourmet creations. He gifts me a small block of hashish. I offer him a thousand 'thank you's,' he returns five hundred 'you're welcome's.'

– Name Unknown –

I had been dancing to music in my headphones, arrhythmic with the ocean's lull, unseeing and gleefully eating my hair. In my purple top and beige, knee length floral skirt, I writhed– breathing heavily, escaping myself. The Earth slipped beneath me, unstable sand melting, each step fading instantly in new waves that kissed my ankles, born again.

I turned and saw his long hair some twenty meters to my left, seated at the ocean's precipice, noting his red backpack straps and waving smile. The shoreline danced around him, water making place for him amidst a moving mosaic of shells that glided along the tide. I waved back and continued dancing, shyer now. Diving back into the midst of privacy– I find myself nested in the deep bends of my nimble legs and breathing in the stretches of my torso, in movement-worship of the watery, distant sky.

I want him to talk to me. His simple, far gaze blew my way on the sea breeze, hints of favored sweetness. I savored his good-feeling wordless magic. I loved his mystery, his nothingness, his distance. I knew neither his soul nor sins, but I sent glassy rainbows of forgiveness in the faint wind, fluttering delicate like dragonfly wings amidst my prayerful whispers, messages of gratitude to his listening gods.

While I'm not looking, he leaves.

As I stargazed after my evening swim, I reminisced on the ripeness of our moment and hoped we would meet again on my walk back to the vaporetto. I tossed

and turned in my addiction to relentless, naive longing, wells of desire unfillable against detached, universal love— forgetting miracles.

By heaven's grace, chivalry remains. He is here, standing in the last possible moment, in the large plaza across the street from the vaporetto station, between a hat vendor and gelateria. *"I was just about to dig through the trash— but I will spare you of that scene now that you've arrived. Dove sei?"*

He is from Romania; a professed vagabond— his serendipitous smile and Piscean teeth soothe my mild nerves, knowing romanticization breeds disappointment. I crane my neck to meet his eccentric gaze. I wonder where he sleeps— he doesn't know how long he's been here or when he'll leave. He says he's sober, except for sugar. I would never throw out gelato or cannoli, but he insists many tourists do. Between us an undercurrent of pulsing water, unspoken anger at the insatiable world, pushes against the fragile streets of Venice, begging downfall— sink and flood. The weight of human incarnation carried with godful admiration, buildings still tall in spite of our tired backs.

I tell him of my dreams, and he says I am crazy like him. He is thirty three— with the long hair and a wispy beard of Christ himself to match, though he shakes his head at the reference. His clothes, like the rest of him, are dusted with a layer of unalterable time, conspicuous. He says that narcissists seep into every life-creek, producers of the worst art. I nod along. He says my dance made him smile, youthful verve, spirit ignited. I want to kiss his pessimistic cheek while I pick his brain, and learn to step like him, in the confident stride of sovereign obsessions, without money or shoes. *"It seems like you're in a rush."* Compared to him I am always in a rush. We plan to meet at the beach at 3pm the next day.

## Marco

I always enjoy the walk to the BAUM library Ca' Foscari University; there is a little lawn, garden of vivacity brought by the students, inquisitive smiles, decadent passion for intelligence, stories told. I was meeting my friends, Maria and Valentina, to sit in the library's main lounge, a public indoor space with air conditioning and comfy red chairs. One of the only basements in Venice, an extensive one: we took breaks from our busy work to sneak through the library's stacks, browsing art history and architecture in procrastination. We sat on the ground, backs leaned against gray metal shelves and dusty books, eyes half open in exasperation of intellect, of backroom daze. We found poetry and whispered it to each other, taking pictures of pages we liked.

In the narrow, bleak fluorescence of the room furthest back, we ran into Valentina's friend Marco. His presence is mellow and creative— he's a student at Ca' Foscari, and offers to check out books for us. Valentina already had three books under his name. He spends time down here, far away from the sunlight and humid hum of downtown Venice's constancy, to write poetry. The labyrinth privacy of endless shelves deep underground sinks him into lagoon essence. He sits at anonymous desks around blind corners, blank tables and plastic chairs overwhelmed by bulky computers, stationed stagnant since 2010, open to the library catalog search page in perpetuity.

I hurriedly browse the incessant shelves and pick up a book, hardly registering the title, glazed over in dreamscape. I don't care about these topics, would rather read his poetry, or hear him talk about it, heart beating loud as words in silent rows of books. In my temperance I decide flippedly, I want to see him again sooner than I'll

need my book returned. I suggest, inconsequentially, that we should all go get coffee near my house in S. Elena the next day.

In no time Marco and I became great friends. Our unusualities magnetized us a few times each week, to share stories over coffee or spritzes. On long, winding walks through the humid Venetian streets, we echo to each other, leading and following in and out of crowds, across bridges and squares, through tunnels where every sound comes to a pinched, liminal point, moving convergence between portals of silence. Our shoulders touched as we walked. He held his cigarette in the hand further from me, twirling his arm to ash it behind him, underneath echoed footsteps in the narrow calli. Marlboro between delicate fingers— I smell the smoke in his words and want to taste it on his eloquent breath. His leather shoes sound serious on the traphite. He tells me about his mentor, novelist from Oklahoma. On seemingly endless days he distracted me from myself, our hands refusing to drop burning coals, ashes in juxtaposed passion, heat seeped into our overworked minds and starved hearts, often almost arguing but meaning the same thing underneath. Eventually we'd stop at an unassuming cafe or bar— sit outside so he can smoke and I can take it in.

My age and height, he was more feminine, with dyed blonde streaks running through his hair. His wardrobe was minimalist, always in soft, solid colored t-shirts and shorts. On formal days perhaps a light blue button-down. His life is easier than mine— anchored, emboldened. I walk him home amidst endless halls of overpriced stores. I feel comfortable.

Walking along the southern waterfront, we use complicated language to dissect simple things, shaking up pieces of reality like magic marbles of chance in a canvas knapsack. I appreciate his perspective. At the end of my sentences, he repeats back to me the last of what I said, an eager, active listener on track. I told him that

intentionality makes good art, and that all great truths are complex. I cooked us lunch.

In starlight we rode the vaporetto, shrinking into chilled air, still talking, almost shouting over the hum of the boats and consistent roar of cut waves. We wouldn't meet eyes, instead squinting into little sprawls of islands and dissecting churches along Giudecca's shore— little mounds of longing risen in simple lagoon waters.

– Unknown Name –

Like never before, I arrived thirty minutes before scheduled. I quickly walked the familiar twenty minute route to the beach, headphones blaring. My mind is buried deep in future universal catharses, frescoes of blood awash— immortalized to commemorate dark feminine geometry, trillions in every powerful atom of existence. She is churning destruction, river flowing in one direction.

Half lucid, my legs stop as my mind walks forward. I unexpectedly spot him from the corner of my eye— he is sleeping on a bench, bare feet dangling into the sidewalk. My shoulders tense as I am shaken out of my dreamland, astral temple dissipating, delicate architecture incompatible with the moment. Why is he sleeping in the middle of the day? Is he asleep? I'm in a weird position. There are other people around. I'm already past him by the time I decide not to turn back— he can find me at 3pm. Me and my nerves head alone to the beach to enjoy momentous solitude as planned— I pinned my beige floral skirt to my backpack, waving in the wind, perhaps also blending into the sand. I laid out topless— if he doesn't need to wear shoes, I don't need to wear a shirt. I open my eyes every five minutes, squinting into the

steady stream of people along the western horizon. In the humid mirage of afternoon into evening, we never find each other.

I decide to return the following day at 3pm again, hoping he'll think to do the same. Maybe he'll wait for me near the beach, or near the vaporetto, awake this time. It's hard to spot a person hardly known amidst the daily crowds of daytrip tourists in Venice, faces changing so fast you almost forget your own. But the Lido is small, and we've already done it once. I am pulled along the silver cord, fated fishing line of magnetic, quantum desire, co-created, scribbled into the future, leading me back to the Lido. Our gods shook hands, old friends, fingers losing touch as they looked back to walk past again.

I arrive an hour late. My eyes scan the crowds. I consider asking around, or leaving a note in the trash can where we first spoke, but I don't even know his name. I want each face to be his, to recognize mine. I want my presence to summon him, my diviner. I fell in love with the search, yet as days passed, the importance of his mystery fades. Split-second glimpses, eyelash flutters entangled with present passerby— I used to look through them, past them— now I see in a rested gaze that they hold more of what I'm looking for than his washed-out memory. The spark that had ignited our ashen embers, dancer and audience on the beach, fades into suffocated gray. I search for him less and less, but the door never fully closes.

### Serafino

If the sun is bright, I keep my shoes on as I walk on the thin plastic boardwalk that leads to the sea – from the street to the public beach. The path is too narrow and the thin stripes are hard on my feet, jagged cheap and hardly raised above the piping sand. I always step aside when others pass by me in either direction. The sand gets

between my shoe and the bottom of my foot, hot and dry exfoliation. I can't wait to dip my feet in the ocean, shake out my shoes and survey the crowd from the knowing sea's perspective.

On the boardwalk I blare my headphones, skull-bending music trailing my beach commute from the vaporetto. A silent world is easier to ignore. The boys who sit by the surfboards every afternoon sell unending stretches of beach blankets and umbrellas into the claustrophobic public path. I tread lightly, never knowing where to step, trying to look past them, blind to sales pitches, almost there.

His smokey green-gray eyes meet mine, hand extending a cigarette in my direction. "*Vogli Fumare?*"

"*Senza tabacco, si.*" As he retracts I notice the faded, grainy tattoo scaling his right bicep, barely legible as a gravestone amidst a half dead vegetation, ambiguous bouquet. I wait for him to return with some hashish, and we sit on one of his blankets along the upper edge of the shore. I roll a joint – I remember now he takes too long and puts tobacco inside, lost in translation. While he's not looking, I tuck away half of the tiny hashish block as a gift for my future self.

Our conversation lulls softly with the distant waves, mirrored in his absent dreamscape eyes. My lighter is almost dead, so we cup our hands and turn our backs to the wind, inching closer. He says something about his ex-girlfriend back home in Morocco. I pry– they dated for eight months, which ended when he moved to Italy two years ago. I ask him when his birthday is, but he doesn't understand my question. He has no knowledge of English and knows remarkably little Italian, likewise, I do not speak Arabic.



The couple twenty feet behind us comes around and asks to borrow our lighter. They return ten minutes later to ask if he sells weed— he replies no, shooing them away.

We sit in silence, I lay down. “*Vieni qua,*” he offered himself to me. I scooch closer and rest my head on his thigh. I try to relax my neck. I let him run his fingers through my hair, and rest his hand on my upper arm. I wonder if anyone here knows his birthday. He lights a cigarette, stoic yet absent, and asks me if I want some.

I close my eyes and enjoy closeness, timid but peaceful. I feel his hand slip under my arm and onto my waist. He fiddles with the fragile belt loop on my beige skirt, I decide eventually to swat his hand. I anticipate what’s next, but don’t want to move, softened into his leg, good enough. I inhale his stale, westward headed tobacco, decaying vicariously. I want to fade into the beach landscape like those ashes, last second to burn lost, but free.

His spine bends, leans down into my periphery as he kisses my cheek. I want to be invisible, not here, disappear into a dimension without loneliness, fuel for a life drunk on fiery moonshine, sea-sick drunken beach, abandoned and shameful, holding tight and not releasing. I realize I do not want to kiss him. He is here every day, eyes pressed, lusted narrative built, architecture of gaze masculine as I sleep. He decides what words of mine that he doesn’t understand, more each time. The line between malice and ignorance is a gray fog, murderous smoke silhouettes innocent and guilty the same obscured breath, outside perspective, action, influence. My sacred, timid indecisions render insignificant to the man towered above me, arm closed over me. He tries to kiss me again, closer to my lips.

I sit up and brush past him, violated, and give a mild, disapproving half smile. I set up a wall, buying time, placating: “*Non voglio adesso. Forse un altro giorno.*”<sup>1</sup> Maybe I will change my mind, or need more weed. I largely do not want to aggravate him. The situation was inescapable. Fantasy, his beautiful facade fallen into ugly violence— I grieved my last unscorned look at his edifice. Butterfly wings, his insect center is only seen too close, too late. He asks me for the thousandth time if I will go swim in the sea with him, ‘il bagno.’ He proclaims I am afraid of the water.

### Marco

I sat on my bed and watched a bug of unknown species scuttle along the window on my right. An email notification from Marco lights up my phone screen. He’s in Milan, on a weekend trip. The message notifies me that his phone and credit cards were stolen— but ‘he’s not too worried.’ There is only dust in his world to worry about yet he perpetually problematizes the mundane, fortuitous annuit. I don’t envy him, he makes poor use of his disposition. From my fog I stare into his silhouette, his personality built upon helplessly crooked axioms of distorted patriciate greed. My stomach turns— the scales of justice meant to slide, frozen rigid. In waves of obscured likeness mortal petals fall, divided and conquered, at the same time the selfish parts of us live on, frozen in a time outside love. It’s not his fault, but he’s my problem. Stakeless, paradoxical rewards, monument to fix or at least understand.

I decided to reply to his message, filling him in: “*I ran into Alice and Emma on my way home from the Lido yesterday... they asked if there was something going on between us.*” People we both fell in with once we got to Venice. I met them at a bar nearby Ca’ Foscari, they’re both artists. Emma is a poet— hers are optimistic pleas, words flower

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<sup>1</sup> I don’t want to now. Maybe another day.

petals on delicate pages, meant to be read in a whisper. Marco's are stoic and grandiose. They used to read each other's works over cappuccinos and small tables on slow mornings, until one day Marco insulted her art. He claims it was a failed petition of desire, a dismal display of attraction, abuse of beauty, immature failure. I was skeptical of his perspective.

Though I'm no poet, I had grown suspicious that he finds me attractive as well— his little dissatisfactions with my signature sweet, hardly said, obscured in flat words that mean almost nothing. His eyes reveal an inner sharpness that only knows how to take— discern to usurp, judge. I have a distaste for bitter consequences and a thirst for metallic magic, wine-drunk intimate truth. I want to know how and why he suffers, what makes him smile while he's alone, how alone he feels each day. I want to give him something he's never had, scribble my uniqueness in an abstract line along new boundaries, equally mortal as every other. I want to watch, to coalesce. With a reminiscence on the softness of his voice, I fixed my mind's eye upon his delicate Capricorn ears and gentle frame, angelic mystery draped in simple clothes and heavy silvers— mundane fractal wing fantasies tossed into the universe, beckoning.

### Elio

From my blue towel, I see a man in a green speedo sprinting along the shoreline. He is muscular, bulky yet agile. Hollering, he cheers himself on, lioness speed and muscularity, presumably taunting his friends. The idea makes me smile. His body shakes as he obliviously runs past the older Indian man, sweat stained white t-shirt warping his beer gut. He has been watching me for the past ten minutes, hardly pretending to do something else. Why is he wearing sneakers so close to the water? They match his black shorts, and his hair brushed to hide male pattern

baldness. I want to hide, cocoon my true aspects in my beach towel. He lingers in the dampness near shore, gaze heavy and unrelenting.

While I'm not looking, Serafino finds me. I don't stir to greet him, I act unamused, say I would like to be alone. He's so incessant. Has he ever let go of anything? He wants me to come lay with him instead, and offers me a blanket, magnanimous falsity. I reach into his offers, discerning for substance, and my hands sweep at nothing— in Neptunian illusion, nothingness behind each level and devil. I curse the stars, invisible, and I shoo him away from behind my sunglasses, unnamed breeze-ridden with my hand, celestial. I feel surrounded, unsafe to enjoy my life. Arrival, consequence— he turns away.

Today I am wearing purple lipstick. I lay into the setting sun, feet pointed away from the shore, alone enough. An innocent man to my left grows increasingly nervous. He seems like someone who's usually happy enough, only now tightly wound. I wonder what he would say if I asked. I want to meet him spirit to spirit but not face to face.

Eventually he paces between the shore and his towel, puzzle and tear. He whispers to himself, lost in urgent thought, as his eyes encroach the shore scanning for upcoming issues just before he steps— sharp words could draw silent blood, unspoken words worse. Each promenade he inches closer to me, fear-filled attempts to meet my eyes. He wades for a few minutes in shin-deep water, brooding foamy green, half-lucid. Is he still here? In contemplation he peeks over his shoulder into my periphery. He circles back, sits, dries off, breaches shore again, closer each time, over my shoulder.

Eventually he crumples towards me, languid. He wants to be invisible too. I instinctively draw my knees to my chest. We shrink and fold, soggy paper in

tumultuous water, spit back out. He is short with loosely bowl cut hair. I imagine his chest is hairy. He seems well meaning. His swim shorts are teal and neon yellow. He is twenty eight, an accountant, which he regrets becoming. He lays mild, placid eyes on me. We talk in long simple stories. Eventually he sits in the sand to my right– I reach for my shawl. His smile is cheeky and youthful, etched with echoes of anxiety. He oozes, my praise rolls in from the shore off his tongue, sticky sweet, sapping to the roof of his mouth as he offers definitions, godly imaginations, claustrophobic sculptures of who I am.

I stand up to throw out an arbitrary piece of plastic at the trash can far away. He comes with.

*“I’m going to take a nap now.”* He is gone by the time I wake up.

### Serafino

Sometimes I render myself sufficiently invisible as I enter the Lido, and nobody notices my presence. Serafino is often lost, head dug in an empty task as I sneak past. His friends are usually also preoccupied. If I shrink into myself, hush and quicken, and hide my gaze in avoidance– I can slide past, free from a considerable share of usual half-day’s surveillance.

This afternoon I am not so fortunate. Serafino rises from the lackadaisical chair near the surfboards, three slow steps in my direction– delicate menace. I use my most unenthused politesse. He always asks the same thing, *“Vogli fumare?”*

I won’t, at the risk of paranoia in his presence. I’m sick of him asking and I let him know it in my tones, plastered behind pragmatic ‘maybe later.’ Chances are magnanimous only when deserved. Any vestige of his charisma eroded, harsh sand

exfoliating wind. Inner compass counter clockwise I squint and shield my face from the dust.

### Cipollino

I found myself in a vast emptiness at the North end of the beach, to avoid the crowding near the entrance. As I searched for the right spot, I gave a half-smile to the man along the horizon, seated squarely along the shore, on an isolated concrete block between jurisdictions of beach. My simple kindness is devoured, exploited— my blood poured into the chalice of his fantasies, a few drops splattered on the ground and left in the sand. Ignorant of his potential hindrance to my godful peace, undesired rewards, I settled myself very far, yet inescapably and suffocatingly too close, to him.

I was essentially alone, a rare expanse to lavish in tiny Venice, exponentially more free from the everyday humanity that radiates from bad art and seeps through suspicious pores to break weak bones. Contrastingly I also relish in the escape from loneliness that brushes like sandpaper against raw skin when I rub shoulders with too-happy Italian families on the crowded vaporetto, or see couples kissing in the sea for unending hours.

My universe of lucidity expands, unseen, radiant as I sneak into the greenery upshore to smoke my recently accumulated hash, put in my headphones, and dance until I grow tired.

My blue towel, layed out and still damp and sandy from last time, catches my collapse— I landed back exposed in the afternoon sun, unexpectedly ablaze after a long storm this morning. I peer up at the sand, close over the corner of my towel. Granular, I reminisce on the dew-time droplets that danced earlier along the canals in unprecedented geometries. They will trickle airborne patterns across the later,

lesser seen, ocean waves, a whisper into which I drifted, pouring my soul upon the sand in worship of the late sun.

Urged awake by the heat of my skin and beckoning scent of cool angelic ocean breeze, I opened my eyes, gaze tracing the ground, head craned left, neck stiffened from sleep. In the light gold haze between water and Earth I see the radiant, glorious faded figure of a man, changing clothes along the shore. He takes his time, facing away from me, though for all he knows I am still asleep. He leans over, stretching his muscular back, and reaches to uncuff his ankles from pants— teetering on liquid ground at the edge between realms. Perfectly uncanny as a breathing statue, heaven's architecture divine. The humidity clings curly brown hair to his dew dropped neck. As he bends it falls over his eyes. Twitching slightly as he tries to cover himself, he remains shied away. Yet at the same time he seems to savor the empty beach, moving slowly. I wonder if he can feel my caressed gaze, the chill rush of novelty or the soft heat of love, a blown kiss from sand or sea, only true from the humble distance of strangers. I prop myself up on my elbows and watch him, head tilted a different direction than my eyes. I feel the exasperated, aggravated sun pulse into my back, hungry. We beat together. I wait until he walks away to head to swim.

The man from the far side of the beach snuck over to me while I wasn't looking. His hairy back caught an orangish hue in the sun, sitting adjacent to his bald, slightly sunburnt head. He towered over me, front heavy, militaresque. I traced the hems of his clinging, lime green swim shorts with eyes of glared refusal, reading the tune of swishing wet polyester between his thighs in his paces, every step calculated, closer.

We converse— I don't bother to ask his age. He is merciless— In Italian, my voice raises. He comments on my imaginary partner in the states; he comments on

the plans I have later this evening. I look back— along the shore he kicks sand like a child, while I scribble into my bloody journal about the big, menacing man called Little Onion.

### Marco

We caught up over wine, leftover red from Raphael. Marco meets me in the park, cigarette half finished. wearing the same collared t-shirt and soft shorts as usual. I rest my head on his shoulder as we watch the moonrise from our delicate red bench perch on the waterfront. He reads me passages from a little book with a soft fabric magenta and white cover. I tune him out and read other passages. My eyes trace their edges as I sort through moments, stacked and influencing, arbitrary borders read in no particular order. On the shoulders of the past stands rhyme and reason, condensed into moments dead and reborn before you can register them. He tells me of the guilt he feels at the hands of his parent's wealth. I smile on the outside and roll my eyes on the inside.

I take a deep breath, risking nothing amidst inevitable death, and dip my toe into my glossy puddle of overdriven half-charms. *"I had a dream last night that we were dating. It seemed kind of nice... not that I think we should date, but a fling could be on the table."* It seemed right to bring it up.

*"I'm so grateful you think that..."* Doors to my fantasies creak shut. Pools of my deep wine blood swelter behind closed doors. It leaks along the floor and pushes at the handle with deep pressure. Creaky metal rattles as hinges bust in subconscious halls, wooden doors bending in adrenaline beats. The flavor overwhelms my sinuses, at first painful, but I linger and find its metallic taste sweet as I drown in my own fervor. Lamentations for eons of gods poured upon Earth's crust, delivered from



golden chalice to golden bath house chambers of the deep inner worlds. Boys my own age never like me.

What if he thinks I was in love with him? His ego is ever-more overgrown, putrid weeds in the divine garden. Watered with greed and timid attention, commitments alluded to and unmet in worship of a false god, rotten amidst the meek. Demanding the facade of meritocratic truth, prophets gladiate as vital creeks run dry. Crops wither; the great turtle draws into her shell, man's footprints left in the muck. All I wanted to do was test the waters. He spit mine out, undertone taste of metal.

I watch our friendship dissipate like ashes outside as he smashes the tip of a cigarette into the metal bench arm. I stomp it out after he tosses it to the ground, and hope he doesn't tell the people we had fallen in with.

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*Milan*

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I dropped my heavy brown backpack and changed my clothes, from one tube top to another. Drenched from the July heat, I rinse my face with cold sink water, already thinking ahead to what evening will bring. After a long day of train travel, I walked an additional hour through Milan's urban streets, saving money on cabs to compensate for my concert ticket. I meandered tangential to Milan's central downtown spiral, headed through Chinatown, arriving finally at my hostel. With no time to waste, I throw the essentials in my fanny pack. I take ten deep breaths and arrive in Milan— already late.

## Olga

I walked quickly along the outer perimeter of a drudgy park. Little soda cans, one coca-cola and one lemon fanta, are pushed into my hands. I crack open the former, stealthily downing two large pill capsules filled with magic mushrooms as I approach the pit entrance, preemptively clearing myself for security.

*“Hey, is it alright if I join you?”* Asks the girl who suddenly appeared on my left. Happy to be accompanied, I breathe a sigh of relief. I quicken to keep up with her long strides. She asks if I have a cigarette. I offer her the lemon fanta from my fanny pack.

She is my age, a model, who moved here from Poland— bags under her eyes from nightlife obligations and work travels between Milan and Rome. She says her family sucks and there’s no reason to stay in Poland— Her silver linings tie bows with my gold thread, twisted fortune. Red scabby dots cover her arms. An allergic reaction to her moldy apartment, assigned to her by her agent. Gucci gave her time off to recover— she says the industry is toxic. In her newfound hours she had serendipitously bought a ticket to see our favorite band. She says good art is interesting foremost. Her stride has unmatched confidence, witty and sarcastic. She thinks I live in Milan too and can’t wait to be friends. Colors grow brighter as joy bubbles in my chest, leaking out in giggles, happy to have a companion.

They make us separate at the security checkpoint. I tighten and shrink, stuck on a stranger as I dive into intuition and out of rationality, getting higher. Everyone around me is speaking in Italian. It’s a loud jumble. I’m not sure what line to enter. Will they touch me? How do I scan my ticket? Everyone around me is smiling so I smile too. I try not to trip over my feet or knock anything over. I clumsily squeeze past a frustrated woman, her purse contents splayed along a small table, catching bits

of her tension like flies in Summer sweat. I want to be invisible– dead one day soon enough.

Connected by fortune, we drift back together before entering the pit. Olga and I found a spot to sit along the upper periphery, in the open grass to the left of the front runners. People are sprawled around us. The sea of blankets laid in the dry Summer grass grows increasingly sparse further from the stage. In the blazing early sunset, hot with many hours to go, I sit on her left side to stay in her shadow. Bass reverberates into the ground and then rises up through the legs of the dancing crowd. I lean my head on her shoulder as we swim through each other's secrets, yelling over music words normally whispered. She tells me I am very beautiful. I take off my shoes and roll in the grass, almost green and wet with life, as I return the compliment.

Having grown thirsty, we join the mob pushing forward at the bar, and dive into each other deeper amidst a clammy line of customers. What do I want to drink? Pressed up against the counter, we pulse into each other impatiently, with reckless drive and clamped sweat, unruly fervor– my smiling dilated pupils peer sideways over cat eye sunglasses. Reality shifts around me– we order two aperol spritzes. A prayer of gratitude to the gods who delivered my Scorpionic friend, magnetized into fate. She's full of free will and half-functional overpowered charm. As she unties her gray-blue cardigan from her waist, puts it on to cover her scabby arms, she smirks and says "*Watch this.*"

"*Do you have a cigarette?*" She asks the bartender, piercing his eyes with hers. Underlying powers, her intense subtleties knead sultry strength, a female gaze that lets the word leak between her cupped palms, cracked open. Anything is possible. I want a cigarette. Maybe I want to kiss her right after she smokes one.

His lips press together, chin tilted down as he leans across the bar. *"Listen. I am working now, but if you meet me back here later I will have a cigarette for you. And more."*

She pauses— glancing at him down then up. *"I want a beer."*

We head into the crowd with three free drinks, shoving past tightly packed frowns, sweaty shoulders starting to sunburn, still two hours before for the main act. She carves a narrow, winding path. Turning back to me, she smiles, a smirking tease, and says that she won't go find that man later tonight.

We make our way towards the front of the crowd, where we can see the musicians, packed between thousands of fans. I put on her cardigan to block the sun. We dance until we're tired, then she asks a group nearby for a cigarette, clamoring with the desperation of a thousand lives come and gone, secrets dance in smoke.

Our hands touch— I offer to teach her a telepathy game: *"I will think of a shape that's a color, for example a green triangle, and send it to you, and you guess. Then it's your turn— you send me one, and so on."* We get almost each one right, sensitive and attuned.

Twenty minutes leading up to the main act now— she buys us two beers from one of the employees who weaves through the crowd carrying giant carts of icy alcohol on their heads. To save our energy, we sat on the littered grass, amongst the crowd— we dodged dancing shoes, packed between their legs and relished the relative quiet. In huddled whispers, we parsed through seas of bad men we've met, the true problems of art. Casual and flippant, in flow with chance, we confess half-remembered traumas in insignificant secrecy, sworn unsaid between us two amidst tens of thousands.

The full moon in Capricorn rose like a balloon behind us as the concert finally began. I looked back to watch it rise, seeing her smile. We sing louder, dance closer, crowd packed shoulder to shoulder. Yellow halo peeking behind, I fantasize. We are

amidst the best waves, perfect performance seeps into us as refractive, memoric light, a well of joy abundant forever. I took off my shoes, tucked them into my fanny pack and planted my feet firmly down on the matted, browned grass, receiving.

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*Venice*

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Serafino

I was overjoyed to find my two dear friends Maria and Valentina on the beach. Happy I brought my goggles, we take turns using them, showing off in the heavenly crystalline waves that refract our dazzled auras. The water muddies as we kick up sand along the seafloor— in the murky anonymity of vastness someone inevitably gets stung by a jellyfish. We grip each other's arms, laughing with fear, and wade quickly, cautiously back to shore. The almost-too-cold breeze dries us off. We lay flat so it glides over us, transparent and only felt like invisible eyes. We scan the shore, pausing to imagine the lives behind little moments sprawled beneath beach umbrellas and upon blankets. We play a few rounds of the telepathy game.

An Italian man in a white speedo, clung and see-through, emerged from the waves. His energy is unexpectedly fiery, with heart beats of lionlike confidence. He combs his fingers through his mane; Venus enters Leo. The water he brushes off of his eight pack runs down his adrenaline grooves. It may roll off, gravitas; we are humbled. The fertile ocean blossoms around him. We put on our sunglasses and tilt our heads slightly away. Our focus wanes— he's still doing push ups by the time our conversation lulls. We fall back on him, trickling into thoughtful silence. Eventually he stands, wipes the sweat from his brow, and smiles with pearly teeth to compliment

his tight bottoms, grotesquely magnificent. He struts back into the Adriatic, his first home, who greets him with open arms.

Golden moments come and go as we pass the evening in wistful luxury. The beach breathes a sigh of relief as people trickle back onto the streets. My friends leave the Lido to get dinner at a restaurant nearby— before it gets dark. They nod in agreement to my haphazard, flippant speculation that the three men seated at the picnic table behind us will approach me once I am alone. Waving goodbye, I reach into my bag with my other hand for my skirt, to shield myself from the evening mosquitos.

Before I can pull my headphones over my ears and press play on a guided meditation, I am greeted by a wicked aura— jagged soul squatted in front of me. My inner critic relents, I thought I was invisible in the obscuration of peace, of waters muddied in the anonymity of protection.

“*Ciao Serafino,*” I say flatly, sharply. He asked me if I had weed. Even though I did, I said no. I was sick of his vile presence faster than I could get rid of it.

In an instant, his tone shifts— “*Hai un problema con me?*”<sup>2</sup>

Heavy darkness sets in, My voice raises. “*Vorrei essere da sola per favore. Vorrei essere da sola adesso per favore. No grazie adesso, vorrei essere da sola per favore. Non voglio fumare con te. Forse un altro giorno ma adesso no.*”<sup>3</sup> In ashen moonlight, he pushes back.

“*Ce l’hai?*”<sup>4</sup> He asks, louder and more sternly.

“*No.*” We argue, he stares me down, still squatted, with disapproval and entitlement smothered all over his face. I ask him why he isn’t listening, why he is pretending not to understand what I’m saying, furiously annoyed.

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<sup>2</sup> Do you have a problem with me?

<sup>3</sup> I want to be alone please. I would like to be alone now please. No thanks now, I want to be alone please. I don’t want to smoke with you. Maybe another day but now no.

<sup>4</sup> Do you have any?

*“Ce l’hai?”*<sup>5</sup>

I’m angry when I should be scared. I pause to breathe, untense my eyes, strained upwards. I read his body language, building a wall of mirrors, to force him to stand up and walk the fuck away.

*“Non capisco–”*<sup>6</sup> I roll my eyes and pretend not to understand what he’s saying, exasperated.

He yells now, accusing me: *“Oh, non parli italiano molto bene?”*<sup>7</sup>

I scream back, voice raspy, that he’s the one who doesn’t even know the word for birthday– but he doesn’t understand what I’m saying.

He offers me a cigarette, arm jutting forward, tense, shaking, too close. Marlboro delicate– twitching like prey between choking fingers.

### Sylvio

I shy away into the dark emptiness of the sands. Clammy sea-god hands rearrange the moment, dice rolled wrong, dangling before me a timeline of overdriven half falsities, the world as seen through a translucent refractive glass bead, pulled from a treasure chest at the murky bottom of the ocean to protect the meek stranded on lawless, defective land of overgrown human nature. The sea, a whirlpool of karma and ruthless justice offers a pearl of bright comfort, reflecting the evil of night back onto itself. I hunkered into the loud hum of the rising tide, my headphones wrung like a brace around my tight neck. I choke down my unprocessed fear, half reassured. He’s gone now. It’s not completely dark yet.

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<sup>5</sup> Do you have any?

<sup>6</sup> I don’t understand.

<sup>7</sup> Oh, you don’t speak Italian very well?

I lay flat along the shore, melting in sandcastle ruins. The glittering stars, in candle brilliance, offer astral blinks and twitches in a passive clamor for Earth's growing up. I ask the constellations unanswerable questions. I want to be one of them, untouchable, beyond perspective. I long for the solitude that births loneliness as hidden eyes peek from every crooked wood knot and distant, jagged cold shine of the sea. I want to relax but my shoulders are rigid— unassuaged and exhausted— the last protective structure, the foundation that juts from the sands, covered and uncovered, eroded in the archaeology of unescaped time and violent infinity.

My moment of solitude is over before I register it. He pans slowly into my frame of vision so as to not startle me, one curious man strolled over from the picnic table behind— they haven't moved since my friends left only ten minutes ago. I didn't notice they were still here, retroactively glad they bore witness to my fight against Serafino. He introduces himself, Sylvio. His smooth voice soothes my raw throat, his honey-tongued words are mild and polite. Some parts of my body stiffen, others relax. I lack the energy to decipher the moment, my looking glass abraded and askew.

He and his friends recently moved here from Sri Lanka to work in hotel management— it's their first time at the Lido. Another man from the table pops over to join, then another. They assume I am Venetian, as though I've lived here since the city's first cisterns dug, having heard my ancient anger, busy gods in the nightmarish spectacle of moments previous. The air shifts around me as they do what only humans can do— change the landscape, to fulfill telekinetic promises half-began, sworn into eventuality. The incessant roar of the sea seemed to lessen, no longer needed. The boys are charismatic and non-invasive, joyfully naive. They laugh at my jokes. Two of three laze back to their picnic table.



I am left with Sylvio. Alone with me again, his saccharine charisma returns with a force as he fawns. I wish the enigmatic night would eat me and leave him standing clueless. Man's interminable missions, tall mountains climbed to peek past the prideful horizon of desire, are always hollow as they step unknowingly on the graves of those whose bones pave their path, ground into gravelly sand by the blind and hungry. He finishes sweet talking, almost seeming to anticipate my applause—offering a paradoxical “*stay safe out there*” as he finally turns back to his friends.

I am alone at last. I burrow as deep as my scratching fingers can into the unrelenting static haze of indigo night. I wrap my blue towel around me like a shroud, to fight cold wind and bugs on my exposed feet. The stars tease me from their authentic and undecieving realms, extending arms down that never reach. I sigh in confusion as I examine the tangled mess of threads in my hands, blues, golds, and silvers tightly knotted together. I pick—unable to unravel the clumped chaos—beads of intuition, fear, and faith strung fragile, a tangle of pearls gifted before each incarnation.

Sylvio has returned one last time, sorry to interrupt, to hand me his business card—personal phone number scribbled along the bottom.

### Giuseppe

Late putrid heat blazes in Venice past the Summer Solstice. The sun leaves caressed marks on my skin— a splotchy tan has settled onto my back in the place I can't reach. My skin exfoliates itself with beading pearls of sweat, my nose bleeds lessen in the humidity, my hair more blonde and greenish, bleached by the fertile sea. As I squeeze through the crowds of Saint Mark's square, making haste slowly, I feel every passing tourist's wet skin as we rub shoulders, slick in the stone-lined square by

late morning, their t-shirts drenched by early afternoon. The people weave a complex matrix, little plastic fans pulse like atoms situated along the human helix, the cosmic street that trickles, fatedly and inevitably, towards the beach.

I find myself at the Lido with them. At this point my towel is permanently ingrained with sand, stuck between its many polyester fibers, unshakeable and damp. My activities list dwindles hand in hand with my lazed consciousness, hungover from creative overdrive and one too many spritzes late last night.

The Indian man is back– watching from a distance, in the same white shirt stretched around his gut. All I want to do is sleep. I furrow my brow and shake my head in his direction, forcefully reflecting his ugly energy back to its source. Sick and calloused– I roll to face away from his audacity, sandwiching my face under my upper arm to block out the perverse, solar world, and hope he won't linger until I wake up.

My rest was sublime: my soul of sand melted into Earth, my glassy energy sprinkled along the shore and in rainbow sea foam. I closed my eyes to greet profoundly simple angels of higher form. They unlocked the portal to my soul's riches with a golden key, I stirred– pouring into itself, molecular ripples of ocean waves. The architecture of every moment glistened in infinite layers, built and unmissable, sticky sweet on tongues that treasure the taste. Each connection, each ocean swimmer since the first dewdrop's dawn, composed, strung out along staffs of twitching telepathic overlap, waves splash over our heads at the crossroads. In their peaks and crescents live the gods, omniscient. They watch crystalline light refract through my valent dragonfly wings, each wavelength of infinite possibility teetering between already dead and never born. The eternally sacred accept my tears of joy into their well of soft love, gentle heat from joyful embers warms my open palms, receiving.

My eyes remain closed while my soul is shaken awake by godly fingers, who snap to open doors of fate— opportune portals in the sky that unite heaven and earth. I am wearing purple lipstick again. It crusted my mouth shut slightly, I crack it open as I yawn. Masses leave the beach, on the other end of my silent blink that ushered their arrival, as the orange line along the horizon fades into a yellow that blends arid palms and thorny groves. My dream-haze has left a heavenesque imprint— pearls beam amidst the sand and shells, eye-catching in running water. I see everything, relaxing into what is beyond physical, permeating love as time, blissful graces swim invisible in the infinite sea that I have grown so intimate with.

I hadn't noticed I was smiling at the lone man walking past, with the curly brown hair stuck to his neck, half-up, until he was already smiling back. We meet eyes, in a dazzled prelinguistic moment—detached, still looking. He starts, circling back towards me, pulled polarities, rounding the corner of his square jaw. "*Ciao.*"

He's lived in Venice all twenty seven years of his life, and says he will one day die here too. A third generation painter, he lives in Giudecca and works at his father's art gallery near the Guggenheim. I show him my paintings; he likes the blood. Hopefully I will see his soon. He asks to sit— I offer him a spot on my towel.

We talk until just before the mosquitoes come out, then head to the water. The sea is warmer than the air, inviting and comforting as it pushes us closer together. Our eyes scan the dimming aquamarine horizon as we lull in shallow waves. The sea, in its mild perfection, floats our truths to the surface and whispers them, almost silent between the push and pull of the evening tide, who rolls in as the moon rises.

There is no wind to dry us. Sad to leave, I stumble back to the shore to kiss the sea goodbye. Dipping my feet cautiously into the water, I slid my swimsuit bottoms off, leaned over to grab them, uncuffing my ankles. Giuseppe asked if I threw a ring

into the sea, the great Neptunian abyss waiting to catch my love, inscribed frozen whispers in icy diamond– I will the next time I find myself in Venice. Worshipful sea, weary goodbyes, unknown and already nostalgic, passing– I slide my skirt over my head as I turn away from the tempted, who suffuses in me forever. I tip-toe, my newborn skin sensitive to the well-meaning caress of broken seashells along the damp shore, scattered as fragile rose petal heartbeats and blood drops– back towards Giuseppe, who is still changing, sticky shorts on wet legs.

He buys me dinner near the vaporetto. We wove through evening crowds along the too-straight road. Families perched at gelato shops bleed into our path for us to dart around. My feet know the way on bare pavement, trekked through patterns of people, so my neck stiffens from blind steps, turned absorbed in his beauty. Around a more private corner, we sat and ate, our little outdoor table crowded with plates. Listening almost too close, we swam between Italian and English, sharing worlds as we speculated, pensive examinations, future doused in artistic intricacies, rabid questions of youthful demise, beguiled. He complains of Venice. His Saturn return begins– I wonder which gods protect him. We stay until the restaurant closes.

I visited his family's art gallery the next day to see his works. The door opens to a shallow, packed space with stacked paintings along the ground and high shelves lined with small statues adjacent 'do not touch' stickers. A hoarder's collection, addiction– lifetimes of art and artists shuffled through the narrow doorway I stood in. Diverse arrays of mediums, a jugged mix of sacred and demonic– antique and surreal mixed in haphazard alchemy. I wade amongst the cluttered waters of knowledge, caked in dust, pausing for a moment at a small display along the back wall to name the different marbles and precious stone columns, dragging my finger

along their smooth exteriors– cipollino rosso, red porphyry. He nods enthusiastically, smiling, his humanness rattling the stones on the wobbly plastic table.

Giuseppe's paintings are the highest on the walls, large canvases of abstract expressionism, oil and acrylic psychedelic jutting swirls that capture a metaphysical Venice: nature over man in primary colors. Inspired by beauty and secondary sight, peeking into imperfect infinity, idle gods and unimaginable horizons– overlapping dimensions– love as a time of its own, time stacked as love.

I offer– “*My roommate is in Naples for the weekend–*” he suggests we cook dinner together. Giuseppe is delicate despite his pillared beauty– underneath his tense gaze hides a decadent child of Venice, born eras lost, arrows shot. We are already dead and already reborn. I kiss his cheek as he kisses mine, silken, willowy threads in bows. Sunshine matches, remembers, glares on canal waters as I rush out, almost late.

We met in the park, after my nap in the grass. I stretched instead of sleeping, loosening anticipation from my creaky frame amidst the too-salty, teetered, gravelly soil. I see him crossing the bridge from Castello– he came from the farmer's market, with a haphazard heavy backpack: zucchini and salmon, mint and cucumbers. He also brought six eggs ‘just in case,’ which I found, half cracked and slowly leaking into their carton, in my refrigerator the next day. We make risotto and tzatziki.

He stands statuesque over my shoulder, shirt off in the heat, and watches me dice green vegetables. I show him how under shaky exhales that guide my smooth cuts– gently bumping his chest with my slicing elbow.

We eat across from each other– he appreciates my perspective. We talk with sweet passions, scaling happenstance lattices, trailing sensitive fingers along the gossiped histories of Baroque busts and their graffiti that adorn Grand Canal Palazzos. Cupped palms catch the still warm ashen embers of our intimate curiosities.

Flames of love flicker along a strung lifetime—uniform moment ghost marked, etched into the blank canvases of our minds. To decipher, to squint between threads. To paint on top of. Hours of conversation ooze into silent gazes, melted like candle wax, re-hardened in inexorable wrought conviction, tensions of critical people. I look into him, our jaws locked in focus, his leg mine to touch—lingering, extended desires under the shallow table as midnight breeze whispers from the window. I offer to show him more of my paintings: a series of abstract faces, primary colors from the beach.

In my room, on my bed now, I lay my head on his arm as we talk, eyes fixed downwards as I flip through my little book of paintings, each androgynous edifice a delicate molecule of emotion, blur of musings and memories, forgotten, erased in insignificance, confined to the anonymity of bound time. We lean in closer. He pauses at one he likes, his finger trails the stoic woman's jaw, feeling profile tones and abstract paint brush grooves in her skin.

We smile into divinity, plenitude dreams exchanged between our eyes. He kisses me, with gentle fingers that push my hair behind my ear and caresses down my neck. I run my hands along his arms, curving currents of our late July sweat. I massage his shoulders with my fingertips. His breath deepens, relaxes, and settles into my ear as I find his strong neck. I straddle his waist and kiss him with the gentle passion of a thousand gods and angels, who would descend from heaven's perfect form, would endure lifetimes of human suffering for this moment of mortal beauty.

He picks me up, our arms and legs intertwined, compounding as we slip into perfect grooves, nocturnal heat ever beating. He lays down my torso as he relishes in the softness of my thigh, fumbling the hem of my skirt, my legs bent. His sensitive eyes drink me, down, deeper, he sinks into my secrets, absorbs himself in my

complexity. I watch from above as his paintbrush fingers trace my calligraphic curves– unending glimmers, gold thread infinities knotted since time started movement, nothing lost nor gained. He tells me art is the most advanced technology, as our hearts beat, touching in worship. Our pulses crescendo into wave peaks as water breathes us. We are gods in adult bodies.

His left hand reaches up, lets down curly brown hair from its half ponytail, understanding. It falls over his eyes.