Mercury Autumn

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**Whistling in the Dark**

*(You tell me that everything is going to be fine and I want to believe you, because I want to believe everything you tell me.)*

A girl stands on a football field in the rain. A kite dangles from her limp hands, the tail sodden and dragging in the mud. The rain has plastered her hair to her cheeks and neck, darks strands under a darker sky. She’s pr­­etty sure her sneakers are stained for good now.

She hears the squelching of boots and turns to see a boy with a football clutched to his chest like a toddler’s teddy bear. The rain has speckled his glasses to uselessness, droplets forming rivers down his cheeks. He looks as woebegone as she feels. She makes a choice then, and trudges towards him through the muck.

*(First love is a lovely delusion, like sidewalk chalk blanketing the grimy pavement of a city.)*

The boy looks up at her approach. They stare at each other a moment, with all the naked curiosity of children. All of a sudden, the boy shoves his football under his arm and rummages through his pocket. Triumphantly, he holds up a slender silver cylinder, like a pen sliced in half.

“My dad gave it to me,” the boy says. He flicks a small switch and a red beam blossoms, cutting through the night like a sword through tissue paper, and suddenly he is touching the sky.

*(I didn’t see the rain clouds lurking, even though the thunder should have been a sign.)*

The girl drops her kite. Her eyes are wide as planets. She stumbles closer, palm extended. The boy offers her the cylinder, and she marvels at its brilliance between her dirt-caked fingernails. She lets the laser dart from cloud to heavy cloud, wishing the rain would cease so she could play at connect-the-dots with the stars.

 “You can reach higher with this than a kite,” the boy says. “And the sky is a perfect place to tell stories.” His head tilts to the side like a question mark. His rain-spotted gaze remains transfixed on hers.

*(I cannot look at you, so I shut my eyes tight, and plunge into the murky reddish-blackness of my mind’s whirlpool.)*

 “Shut up,” the girl says, then remembers that’s rude and a terrible first impression and anyways, he’s right. So she takes another step forward, letting his feather-light fingertips wrap around hers. The rain makes both children blink as they tip their heads upwards. Gently, he guides her hands, the beam above them curling into words.

**Numerology**

We used to bicker about our favorite subjects. Unlike you, I have never liked the sharp finality of numbers. Long ago, we set our lives to tick to the beat of a calendar, each day a box to check off before the inevitable. At the start, we had five months to spend together, almost to the day. Five months of striding across campus, knuckles brushing, hands not quite clasped. Five months of lounging on couches, legs piled on top of each other, the hum of the television the subtle soundtrack to our lazy afternoons and contented nights. Five months of laughing as we drove, of eye contact and grins as we tried to maintain composure while working. Five months together. One hundred fifty-one days.

Somehow I didn’t imagine that when you boarded that plane and the moments and minutes between us became miles across state lines, the steady ticking of days would continue. It’s been three months now since you left. Ninety-seven days since we said goodbye, since the bubble you formed inside of my chest popped, leaving me hollow. The twentieth and twenty-third of each month come with a jolt now: the anniversaries of the first day we kissed and the last. Though I’ve never recorded them, the dates when you will arrive home to visit and when you will go again blaze like fireworks behind my eyelids whenever they are shut. Despite your proximity, I likely won’t even see you. Our work will be closed; the holidays will keep us ensnared at family dinner tables. We will quietly exist beside each other, congruent lines on a graph fated never to cross.

You have permeated every part of my calendar. 2019 will be the Year of You.

**A Midnight Parable**

*It is not you who hates me. It is fate who hates us both.*

My mother used to tell me a bedtime story. I told it to you once, on one of our last nights together. You couldn’t sleep, tossing and turning yet trying not to wake me, until I finally rolled over and twined your fingers into mine. I wanted to still your restless thoughts for a moment, bring you comfort in the same way you always did for me. I whispered to you in the darkness, your forehead pressed against mine.

Time and Fate were born sisters, I murmured. No one could say who emerged first. Their mother, Memory, only remembers how they weren’t and then they were, twin souls shimmering into existence like bubbles rising to the surface of a pond.

Time was the solemn sister. Her movements were calculated, rhythmic, measured. Her footsteps were as steady as her name, her posture as straight as if a rod was strapped to her spine. She was never spontaneous, never flighty, though the unfortunate around her loved to label her such. Her self-discipline was inimitable, her discipline identical. Time was not fearsome, but neither was she easy to love.

Fate was Time’s foil, her counterpart. She was wild, expressive, unrestrained. She never seemed to stop moving, always tapping her feet or tossing her hair. Everyone was drawn to Fate, but few realized the danger she worshiped and wielded like the blade of a knife. She glowed like a firecracker, bright and alluring, just before the explosion that turns everything to dust.

Time and Fate had a game they played, a minute distraction from the relentlessness of eternity. They would study the humans whose lives flickered before them like fireflies, glittering brilliances disrupting the darkness. Time recorded her notes in stark detail, describing instances exactly as they were. Fate’s thoughts were elaborate and lush, exaggerated episodes with invented endings. After years of patient observation, each sister would select a competitor and their game would begin.

The rules of the game were wily and ever-shifting, impossible to describe, but both sisters understood them innately, knew that one way or another, the winner would make themselves known. Ever competitive and wily, Fate would attempt elaborate ruses involving every human whose hair or fingerprint crossed the game’s path, trying to turn circumstance to her side. Time would only sit and watch, occasionally scribbling in her notebook. But the rules were cosmic and certain, oblivious to the actions of either sister, and utterly impossible to defy. And in all their millennia playing together, never once had Fate’s champion prevailed.

After each game concluded, Fate set fire to all Time’s notes and musings, Time merely looking on. Fate would vow to never again participate in such an impossible trial. But years would pass and eternity would press and Fate had never been good at ignoring temptation. Inevitably, she would sidle up to her sister, pressing her spire-sharp nails towards the glow of an impossibly brilliant heartbeat, and their challenge would resume once more. And Time won, again and again.

Fate hounded Time’s champions. She became meticulous in her notetaking, trying to reveal any secret that might finally proclaim her victor. Millenia of attempting to alter the game’s progression had made her a master of intervention into human affairs. But study and subterfuge and even outright stalking revealed nothing at all. So Fate let loose a scream comprised of all her frustrations, so violent and heart-wrenching that it made the stars quiver. She channeled her fury towards every one of Time’s champions. These souls felt a shiver, a cold river creeping beneath their skin, before they returned to their coffee cups and newspapers, rolled over and resumed their slumber.

That was the end of the story as my mother told it. But the part that always bewildered me, made me tug at her fingers as she tried to kiss me goodnight, wasn’t the abrupt conclusion, or the irresolvable war between all-powerful sisters. It was Time’s champions. How were they chosen, these cosmic victors? And what did Fate’s wrath do to these glowing souls? What happens to someone who Time venerates and Fate abhors?

I tell you all of this in the darkness, my darting eyes seeking yours. My mind has already spun our conversation that will spark from this story, the spooling threads of your words that will bring me clarity, as they always do. But you kiss my forehead, and your eyelids flutter, and you are lost to the slumber I’d been trying to bring to you all along. I am left alone, staring up at the ceiling in the dark.