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P L U M E

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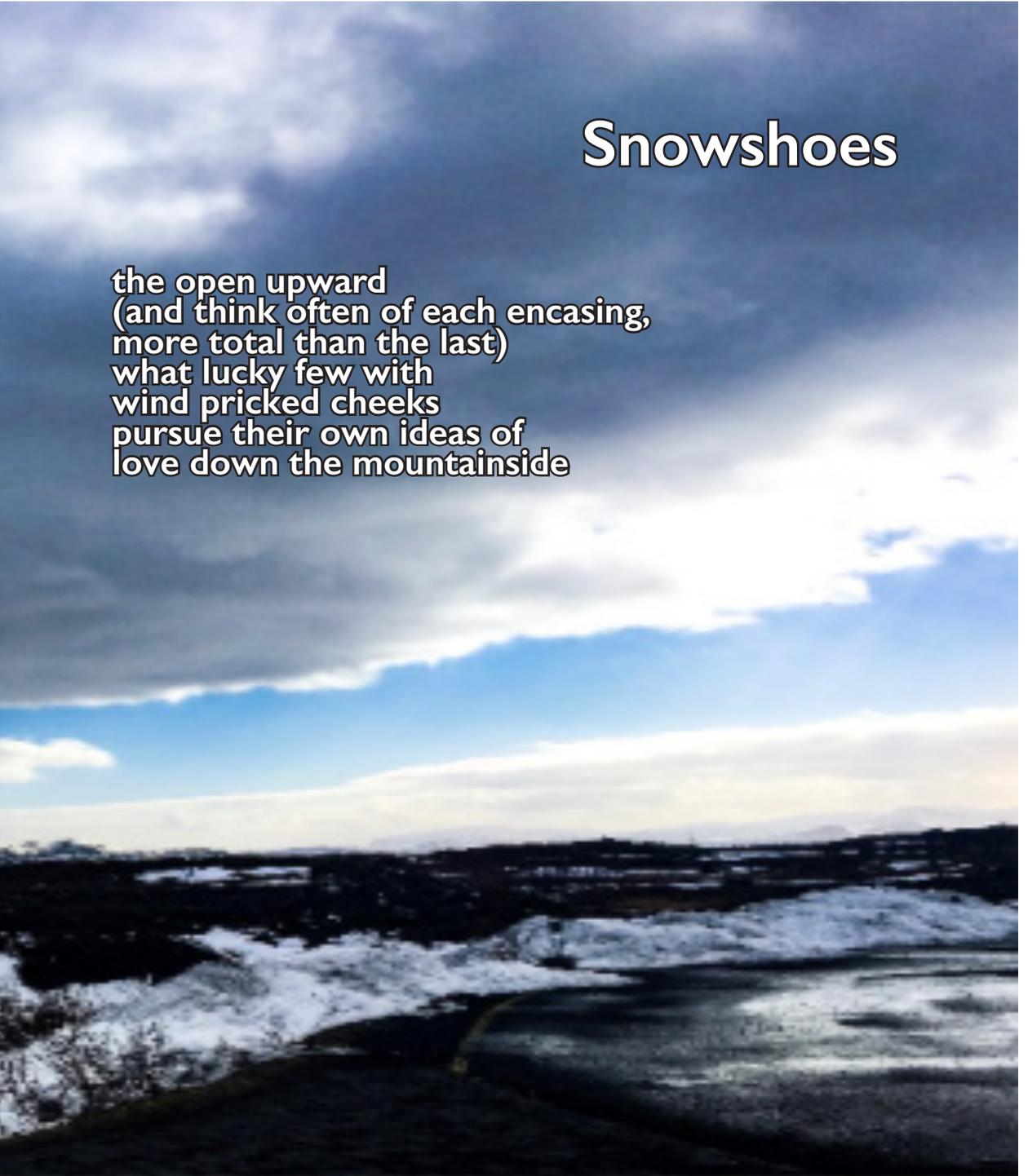
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Snowshoes

the open upward
(and think often of each encasing,
more total than the last)
what lucky few with
wind pricked cheeks
pursue their own ideas of
love down the mountainside







ジャンカラ

四海楼

たこ焼
TAKOYAKI
くわおー
OKONOMIYA
お好み焼



いろいろや



日本

**THE DUSTY STREETS AND VIBRANT
HEADLIGHTS
OF IDLING CARS LINE
THE AVENUES
OF SUBLIME THROUGHWAYS**



Millions of years later...

One day, the walls are suddenly broken. I look back. A person like me appears, and he reaches out to me. "I do not know who I am, but we can find the answer to this question together."

I look at the junction for a long time. And then, "I'm with you."

Towards the moment that I walk to black, black and white exchange. That is, white into black, black into white. Just like stars fall and rise again; the seawater dried up filled with water again. My room changes a look; everything begins to reverse.

"The room changes."

"Because you have made a choice."

Time, never changes.

I, change.

***ENGLISH TRANSLATION**



BLACK AND WHITE*

I wake up in an empty room.

The room is bluntly divided into two colors: black and white.

“Who am I?” I lie at the junction of black and white and kept asking about this question.

“Who am I?” A voice suddenly came from somewhere.

“Who are you?” I turned my eyes away from the border. Silence. Silence. Everything is silence. Still, silence as usual.

Suddenly thousands of, countless “who am I” sounds back to me from the wall.

I continue to be confused: How many worlds are behind the wall?

I shouted, “who are you!” The world becomes silence for a moment, and again the wall questions numerous “who are you?” back to me.

Who am I? I am lying at the junction of black and white space. But who am I.

Thousands of years passed, I am still lying at the border between black and white. I never move...



Fisherman Tales

Once, when I was very little, my best friend in the whole wide world of fourth grade bragged to me that her Chinese heritage extended as far back as the Song dynasty.

“I’m descended from the Empress Cixi,” she said proudly, her head aloft.

“Holy shit,” I thought.

That afternoon, when my father took me home from school, I burst through the door and demanded that my grandpa explain to me our lineage.

“Christe,” I said, my hands on my hips, “is practically a princess.”

He nodded, understandingly.

“Tell me I’m a princess,” I demanded.

“Emi,” he said, “Our last name, ‘Okikawa’ comes from the kanji ‘ookii’ for ‘big’ and ‘kawa’ for ‘river.’” He drew them on the back of my hand.

I grew excited, “Did we have a kingdom by the ocean? With samurai? With geisha? Were we,” my voice dropped to a whisper, “ninjas?”

My grandpa laughed.

“You know, girlie, I think...”

My eyes grew wide with anticipation.

“...that we were probably just poor fisherman. Peasant, basically.”

My interest in my family history did not resurface until I was 6,000 miles away from home, at a tiny liberal arts college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, named Franklin & Marshall College. After spending my entire childhood in Oahu, Hawai’i, it came as a shock to realize that being Japanese-Filipino actually made me a minority. In a sea of blonde hair and blue eyes, I felt small and insignificant--like an outsider in my new home.

People would come up to me and ask what country was I from, commenting on how well I spoke English. When I responded that I was from Hawai’i, they would let loose this short barking laugh, give me a knowing look, and follow up with, “But where are your ancestors from?” It was a prying question, meant to validate what preconceived ideas they had already made about me. Being an American was not enough, they were looking for an ethnicity that preceded it, and ultimately, undermined it.

黑与白

我在空落落的房间醒。

房间生硬地分割成两个色：黑和白。

“我是。”我躺在黑与白的交界处，不断思考着。

“我是。”一个声音忽然。

“你是。”我于把目光从交界处移。周遭却还是一片寂静。

墙壁四周却忽然始无数的“我是”的声音。

我始迷茫，从未有过的迷茫。墙壁后面，到底有多少个世界。

我喊着“你是。”周遭寂静了一下，又再次无数个“你是”的疑。

我是，我是躺在黑与白交界处的空间的一个。。。一个？

几千年过去了，我还是一个人躺在黑与白的交界处，从未移动。

几万年过去了。

忽然有一天，墙壁被打破了，我惊恐地回转头去。那是一个与我长得很像的东西，他向我伸出手，“我不知道我是，不过我可以一起找这个的答案。”

我望着交界处的印。半晌，“我与你一起。”

走向黑的那一刻，黑白交，白色的变成黑色，黑色的变成白色，

斗星移，我的房间，变了个样子，一切始倒。

“房间。。。变了。”

“因你已经做出了选。”



My first year at college was eye-opening and uncomfortable, but an experience that really drove me embrace the Japanese-Filipino heritage that I had once taken for granted. In light of this, I decided that I wanted to chronicle the struggles of a Japanese-American trying to find her place in this world; I am too American for my Japanese heritage, but also too Japanese to be accepted as completely American.

So, this is me, unapologetic and completely genuine. I chose to study abroad in Tokyo because I'm searching for the language still resting on the tongues of my ancestors, and looking for ways to piece together a fragmented heritage they left behind.

It's been almost two weeks since I left Japan, and hardly a minute goes by where I don't reminisce about my time there. However, the transition back into "daily life" has included some obstacles I didn't consider as I sat on the floor of my homestay bedroom, struggling to fit four months of memories into a single suitcase.

The greatest struggle for me, after returning to the States, was figuring out how exactly my study abroad experience fit into my life. How could I keep these memories alive--and cherish them in a way that made those four months really mean something? How would I maintain friendships scattered across the globe? I found myself searching for a way to keep my time in Tokyo relevant to my future, and to utilize the valuable lessons I had learned.

At first, I felt at a loss.

With my departure came the startling loss of context. By this I mean that I wasn't quite sure where I fit into my friends' lives anymore, with the abrupt end to our four-month journey together. These people that had become so ingrained in my daily life were abruptly devoid of their labels, no longer "classmates" or "epals"; I was suddenly at a loss as to how to integrate them into my "normal life" back home in Hawaii.

This led me to be reminded of the final paper I wrote for my Intro to Society class regarding how the idea of “the self”, which dictates how we interact with our community and society as a whole, exists in the Japanese perception. In Japan, the “self” is a fluid concept that is constructed in terms of societal relationships. The Japanese “self” is dependent on a number of factors, such as hierarchy, intimacy, and context. It cannot exist except in relation to other people. Thus, in the light of my departure, I found it to be an incredibly disorienting experience to no longer understand where my place was amongst relationships in flux.

But, I’ve come to realize that these ties are stronger than I anticipated. The bonds we forged can weather time and distance because of the memories we share. I stand here, on the precipice of adulthood, buoyed by the friendships I made in Japan. Their unwavering support that spans oceans and time zones has allowed me to grow in ways I never could’ve anticipated as I set off on my journey in September. I am not isolated, but rather I understand that now I have friends around the world. No matter where I travel, I will always have a home to return to.

I came to Japan to learn about myself. I came to Japan to learn about my family, the heritage that has been held together by threadbare traditions for generations. I came to Japan to learn the language that has laid dormant in my vocal cords, heavy on the tip of my tongue.

But in the end, I learned that I was never meant to make this journey alone—that my heritage, my experiences in Japan, my friendships, and my future, are all interwoven together in a web—inextricable and infinite, like an old fisherman’s net, cast out at sea.





BUCHANAN GALLERIES

RIES

BUCHANAN GALLERIES





Lessons from Hiroshima

A few weeks ago, I found myself standing at the edge of the Motoyasu River in Hiroshima, where I stood two summers ago on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the dropping of the A-bomb. I leaned against the railing, watching the sunset rays glimmer across the metal skeleton of the A-bomb dome, unable to lift the heavy feeling trapped in my ribcage.

I guess it's the finality that gets me. I can't help but picture that day. I imagine the streets busy with people travelling around Hiroshima, on their way to another day of cleaning up demolition sites. Then, at 8:15am, some high school students squatted in the rubble to take a break. Some dusted soot off their uniforms. A few wiped sweat from their forehead, squinting in the bright light, just barely able to discern the distant figures of American planes flying overhead. I think of the charred tricycle entombed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and the young child who watched the city alight with flames.

The cognitive dissonance, for me, is overwhelming and deafening. There isn't a crevasse in the city that I can hide in, because I feel the weight of my ancestor's footprints trailing in the shadows behind me wherever I go. I am a fifth-generation Japanese-Filipino who has lived in Hawaii her entire life. How am I supposed to react to being in Hiroshima? As an American, I felt immensely guilty. The Hawaiian in me remembers Pearl Harbor. The Japanese part of me weeps.

I was born long after the war ended. Even my grandmother was not alive when the attack on Pearl Harbor shook the nation. Yet, she still tells stories of being bullied and ostracized in the immediate aftermath of the war. Her voice always hardens when she spits out the words, "Japs." We sacrificed our own language, and the culture of our ancestors to assimilate into this society.

It feels like the judge speaks slower than sap runs in winter. Finally he announces the winner.

“Put a Pelirroja,” the last words off his lips. I freeze, thinking I heard him wrong. I look to Andrea and she’s already clapping for me. The judges bring over the crown. It’s a foot high and sparkles as much as my first dress. I start freaking out. I can’t believe I won! It wasn’t even my idea to do this! As the judges put the crown on my head, my mouth remains open. The crowd cheers, but I can’t hear them.

This competition has given me the freedom to get wild and perform for the crowd. It’s also given me a way to express myself in the flashiest way possible. It feels good after being cooped up for so long. I can’t help but think that when I return to the U.S. I won’t be able to do this again. I look in the mirror at my crown. This will be my token. I can place it high on the bureau in my room. It will be my reminder of tonight and how absolutely fabulous I am. If I did it once, I can do it again. Perhaps my host family is open and close only because my host brother is open and honest. I smile when I think of telling my family about my win. I can show my mother the crown. I’m sure she’d be jealous of this opportunity and proud that I killed it. I’ll do that, I think. I’ll share with them what happened out here and what I accomplished. I may not be class president, but that dweeb doesn’t get to wear a crown.



huge wig and start smearing the black lipstick all around my lips, making sure to cover half my face. I add black eyeshadow as well, to create dark circles around my eyes. Halfway to blackface, I think. The result makes me look like some terrifying urban creature. Perfect! I throw on some army boots and head out.

I crawl onto the stage this time. The crowd is shocked by me at first. I shift my body and make a bridge with my belly toward the sky. Crawling forward, I feel like that exorcist chick. By the time I'm at the front, they're cheering louder than ever. I feel crazed with excitement and ferocity. I'm giving my all, rolling around on the floor. I stand up and look at the crowd. My eyes wide and wild, I pretend to be scared and curious of them. I scamper to the judges, pretend to be frightened by them, and then I hurry off stage.

After a few more minutes, all three of us are brought back for the final announcement. The announcer hypes us up again and the judges wait, ready. When he finishes they read two names. Andrea Dorea. Puta Pelirroja. I'm confused. Why not one? The head judge tells us we must lip sync for our legacy, for the crown. The song is one of Rupaul's of course: "Covergirl." I would be nervous, if I didn't know every single word and hadn't seen every episode of Rupaul's Drag Race.

Andrea and I are placed at opposite ends of the stage and the lights go dim. In the seconds before the song starts, I take a deep breath. I know I'm ready. The beat starts and we're off. I give it 110%. Vogueing, splits (don't ask me to do a jump split though), all the while spitting out the lyrics like bullets. I make sure to lock eyes with the judges as much as possible. They know who's owning this song. I forget Andrea is even there. Before I realize it, the song is over. I'm on the floor, so I throw up an arm for the finale. I'm panting.

Standing up slow, the announcer gives us a final applause. Well earned, if I do say so myself. Andrea looks at me and smiles. I return the favor. We clasp hands and wait for the final word. Breathing deep while the judges walk over to us, the whole experience runs through my head. Have I done enough to beat Andrea?

We are still waiting for the day we are truly accepted in this country.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Presidential Election, I am forced to come to terms with ideologies that reject me. The “make America great again” slogan leaves me with no doubt that this new vision for America doesn’t include me, as a woman, as a minority. The flood of hate crimes against minorities have made me anxious about returning to the U.S. The thought that the color of my skin and the slant of my eyes will make me a target of abuse in my own country is terrifying. I am scared to be Asian in America.

This election has made me feel like everything my family has sacrificed is still not enough. I began to wonder what I should do in order to distance myself from my culture, in order to prove that I am American—as if that will protect me. But I have found that such bonds are not so easily severed. The Japanese traditions I carry out in my daily life are the threads that connect the generations, from ancestors to present-day descendants. It is impossible to extricate where my heritage begins and I end. It has taken me a long time to come to terms with that—and to understand that ancestry is not a burden for me to bear. I am proud to be Asian-American.

This is why I believe studying abroad is a vital experience. By taking the time to explore cultures different than my own, I can learn tolerance and acceptance, and how to reject the default of what I believe to be the one and only right way to live. I used to feel like I straddled the boundary between two worlds, but now I realize that I am a bridge between two cultures—a gateway for promoting understanding and acceptance. I am not weak because of my multifaceted ancestry—but stronger because of it.





Once again, we're marched one by one onto the stage. When it's my turn I put on a goddamn show. I strut all over the stage. Fuck the Xs. I pose where I want to. I head straight for the front of the crowd, squat down and start eating my popsicle like I don't give a shit about any of them. Then I move onto the judges. Send them the flirty eyes, offer them some of my treat and adjust my titties over their table. Then I flick my popsicle wrapper out into the crowd and return backstage.

All of the competitors are gathered together in the hallway and I remember what happens next. All but three of us will be eliminated. There is a crown and prize money at stake. It's not all fun and games. My stomach clenches as my nerves return. I look around at the group. Andrea, straining under the weight of her headpiece, but still stunning. A brunette in lederhosen. Another queen wrapped in the flag of España. All return nervous glances.

The judge announces the first finalist. I'm not surprised that it's Andrea Dorea. Her hands fly up to her mouth to hide her excitement and she steps forward. The next name is unfamiliar and a queen steps forward who I haven't seen before. She's wearing some weird black dress covered in feathers. And then I hear my name. What the hell? I lift one of my feet to force myself forward. I can feel the excitement and adrenaline surge through me before my foot touches the floor. I've done it! I beat most of the other girls. But, it's not over.

The announcer quickly tells us of a surprise final round. Of course. We have to go back in our dressing rooms and create an apocalyptic outfit. I don't like the sound of that. I didn't bring anything for this! I look at Andrea and even she's sweating. Oh, and one last thing. We only have five minutes.

I sprint back to my room in those wedges, careful to run on my toes. Tearing open the door, I search for anything I can use. I see a sheet and some grey and black afro wig. I remember that I brought black lipstick. Sounds good to me! I get started by ripping the sheet. I take off all my clothes and tuck a part of the sheet into my underwear. I wrap it loosely around my body (so that some of my underwear still shows). I clip on the

Bitch is getting it! I hear Rupaul, "She's so wild. So animal. She's gonna work that sexy body so sexual. She's like a female phenomenon. She's a glamazon." When I reach the edge of the stage, I spin around slowly, holding my hips and let the audience take in every single rhinestone. With a wink at the judges' table to the side, I'm gone.

I'm shuffling in my heels back to my dressing room. We only have ten minutes to get changed for the next round. This one should be easy. For my next outfit, I'm wearing the same wig (low budget hoe, I know) with short jorts, a crop top and a popsicle in my mouth. I'll be serving trailer park realness, the complete opposite of my first outfit. The dress is a bitch to get off, so I grab one of the sexy attendants from out in the hall to help me dress. Then I throw him back outside. I don't have time for distractions right now.

I slip on my next outfit in no time. I reach for one of the cocktails they left in my dresser. After polishing off one of those (three big gulps), I take out the popsicle I left chilling between the glasses. It's half melted, but, I rip it open with my teeth and suck out some of the juice anyway. I gaze into the mirror at myself. Not half bad. I make a few faces and lean in to plant a kiss on the mirror. I jerk my head back quickly. My wig almost falls off. Those huge mirror lights are ridiculously hot. They might bake my makeup on.

I venture into the hall and see that I'm not the first one ready to go. No sign of Andrea though. It must take her longer to achieve that perfection. The attendants usher us into a line, as the others come out one by one. I see the one that helped me and he gives me a smile. I pat my abs, laugh and mouth gracias. And then I see Andrea. This is supposed to be our campy category. She's wearing a cute tennis outfit. Hot pink and white from head to toe, except for the silver racket in her hands. I squint in the dim lighting and realize there are lines near her elbows and knees. At first, I'm confused and then it dawns on me. She's a doll! It's genius. I practically throw my hands in the air in defeat. She wins again! She sees me and smiles.

From the Words of tu Lengua Madre

“Out of poverty, poetry;
out of suffering, song.”
a Mexican saying

Look at yourself in the mirror
mírate:
Morena, Zapoteca, e Indígena
that is what you will always be.
No matter how hard you try
to scrape off the Yalalteca en tu sangre
your roots will always rise up
to embrace
tu alma
back to the burning Earth.
Estoqueada.

Don't walk away in shame
from the words of tu Mami cuando habla
Zapoteco,
instead run into her arms until her words brand tu piel.

Wrap your body, tu cuerpo,
mojado
with the huipil your abuelita made with her strong and worn-out hands.
The hands that have always pressed on the molcajete.
The hands that have always clapped side to side for las tortillas.
For all that has fed your soul, tu alma
before you were born:
 Agardente,
 Espiritu de furia
Because Morena, Zapoteca, e Indígena
is what you will always be.





As we all approach the stage, I go through the checklist in my head. I have the gold heels, which perfectly compliment the golden rhinestones on my purple dress. My wig is a shake and go piece of trash that I'm hoping the judges don't look too closely at. I feel like Taylor Swift at a middle school dance. I'd be that girl getting punch by herself in the corner. I hope I've beaten my mug well enough to look like a chick. ¡Por favor!

“Bueno suerte, bonita.” I look up startled, not even realizing I'm staring at the floor. It's the competitor in front of me. She winks at me and I throw out a “Gracias, y tú.”

She's so gorgeous. I can feel my mouth open. I just let it hang there. She towers over me and I debate putting on much taller heels. Her dress shimmers in the dim light of the offstage area. It's like every color I've ever seen all at once, each one fading into the next. Her hair is in a beautiful swoop almost a foot higher than her head, brown at the roots and blonde near the top. And holy shit, that face. There is no sign of the man underneath. Smokey eyes, contoured cheeks, double lashes, she has it all. I slap myself on the inside for not putting on lashes. I decided to rely on my natural red ones, which I'm just realizing don't match my blonde wig. I know instantly that I can't beat her. I'm not even wearing nails! Before I can turn around and run out of the building (out of the country), the line is moving and I realize they've already been bringing girls out onto the stage.

Sooner than I can bat my natural eyelids, the beauty in front of me is called out. The crowd roars when they see her. I catch her name. Andrea Dorea. Even that's pretty.

“**Puta Pelirroja.**” I hear the announcer call my name and at first I forget to move. I almost forgot my drag name! The stagehands push me onto the stage.

As soon as I see the lights and the crowd, I turn it on. Whatever insecurities I was feeling disappear. The crowd is so huge I can't see where it ends. Their roar is loud and I can feel it pulsating through me, giving me the energy I need. They're playing Rupaul and I don't need anything else in the world as I walk the stage like Tyra Banks at fashion week.

PUTA PELIRROJA

What the fuck did I think I was doing?

I came to España to study the language. I wonder what my castelano teacher would think if she saw me putting on this lipstick. I check my face in the mirror, without any idea if it looks good or not. Should I have painted bigger lips? Was pink a good color? I remember hearing somewhere that you're supposed to match your lips to your taint, though I can barely see the shade on them. Part of me hates how the makeup covers my freckles. I don't feel like myself. But I guess I'm not supposed to feel like myself when I'm wearing four inch heels and, in America, what would be considered a prom dress. Screw it. I'm done. This is about to get real. Watching Rupaul's Drag Race on TV is one thing. Competing in a live competition is quite another. I snag a piece of candy from the tray on my dressing table, adjust my blonde wig and step out of the dressing room.

In the hallway, there are a bunch of us girls. Technically guys, you say. Yes. But when our balls are taped up (under God knows where) I think I deserve to ignore the distinction. I went all out for this. I've never even done my own makeup before. I hope I'm not putting eyeliner where my lip liner should go. I laugh to myself, remembering how I would scream when my sisters tried to paint my face when I was little. If they could see me now...

ON THE RIM

Closing in on my two and a half days in the city of Amsterdam, I watched a coal barge drift past the dock of the Hotel Schip, the boat I was staying on. A monstrous creature, it cut through the early evening, obstructing the city's skyline. With all its cylinders and coal, it felt out of place amongst the art museums and coffee shops. Yet, something about its severe, purely functional nature held my attention. All day, I had wandered among Van Gogh's sunflowers and yet, I could not pull my eyes away from this strange, remote vessel. Why, out of all the things I had seen, from the brilliant tulips in the Bloemenmarkt to Anne Frank's attic, was a coal barge the object that made me feel the most?

I had arrived in Amsterdam close to midnight. Centraal Station lets out in the innermost ring of the city, the place where all the canals flow into the sea. I walked down the street, admiring the way the station loomed over the rest of the city. Turning a street corner, I was stopped by a tall man in a jean jacket. He opened his hand to reveal a small, white packet of powder. I looked up at him and then back at the contents in his hand. He was trying to sell me cocaine. I knew Amsterdam was a city of so-called sin, but this seemed excessive so early in my visit. I declined with a polite "no thank you" and hurried on, justifying the normalcy of the encounter with the fact that it was nearly midnight on a Friday – the best and most obvious time to sell drugs. I walked on, only to be stopped again by another equally tall, tough looking man.

"Did that guy just try to sell you cocaine?" he asked.

Mouth ajar, I fumbled for words. As I stuttered, he pulled out a wallet and showed me a badge. My mind froze, my first instinct to question what an Amsterdamian police badge looks like. Play dumb, I thought, and I would sound like I was lying, but answer too convincingly, and I would sound like I was trying too hard. Then again, was he really a cop? Perhaps he was another drug dealer, intent on defending his turf. I replied, "yes," lying to myself that the truth is always right. The cop nodded and dashed down the street. I continued in the opposite direction wondering if I had just aided in a drug bust or exacerbated a turf war.

So, this was travel. I had spent the two months prior studying in Bath, England, named the world's second safest city - that is, according to the local newspaper. Having never ventured out of the U.S. before, the idea of traveling excited me. However, I was on a mission, too. I was trying to prepare myself to enter, from the outskirts of my life, into its center. Closing in on my junior year of college, I knew that soon I would have to descend into life, that I would no longer be able to stand on the outside, watching the adults go by. I was hoping that travel would give me a different vantage point to observe life and in surveying new cities and people, I would understand life and how best to live it.

Thinking about how to fill my days without the structure of school filled me with dread. Aside from their jobs, I could not imagine how people found things to do without classes, friends,

and activities so readily available. College filled up my time easily and well. School gave my life a clear and easy to follow purpose. I worked hard in my classes. The organizations I had joined were fulfilling. And I knew that while the fallout for any of my failures in these areas might be painful, they would not necessarily be life altering. School was safe, defined and outlined just enough for me to feel independent. As for the rest of my life, I did not know where to begin. I hoped travel would be my syllabus and by visiting new places, I would come to know how people carried on and found meaning to suffuse into their waking hours.

Surely, I thought, the people who live at the center of Western civilization, home to some of the greatest exemplars of ingenuity and creativity the world has ever seen, would know, or at least be closer to, the secret of life and how to live it. Surrounded by beauty – canal houses and castles, museums and monuments – how could you not find motivation or a sense a purpose? Surrounded by such things, I imagined that the people who lived in these places must have felt a sense of urgency to be like these creators, or at the very least, in communion with their spirits. I expected the masters of the Western world and those who walked among them to imbue me with some sense of guidance, but so far, the only thing I had received was an offer of cocaine.

After surviving my run in with the law, I decided to keep walking and descended deeper in the maze of waterways. The slender, 17th century canal houses from the Dutch Golden Age lined the streets making it impossible to see over to the other side. Each street was its own little world. When I reached the end of a path, I turned down the

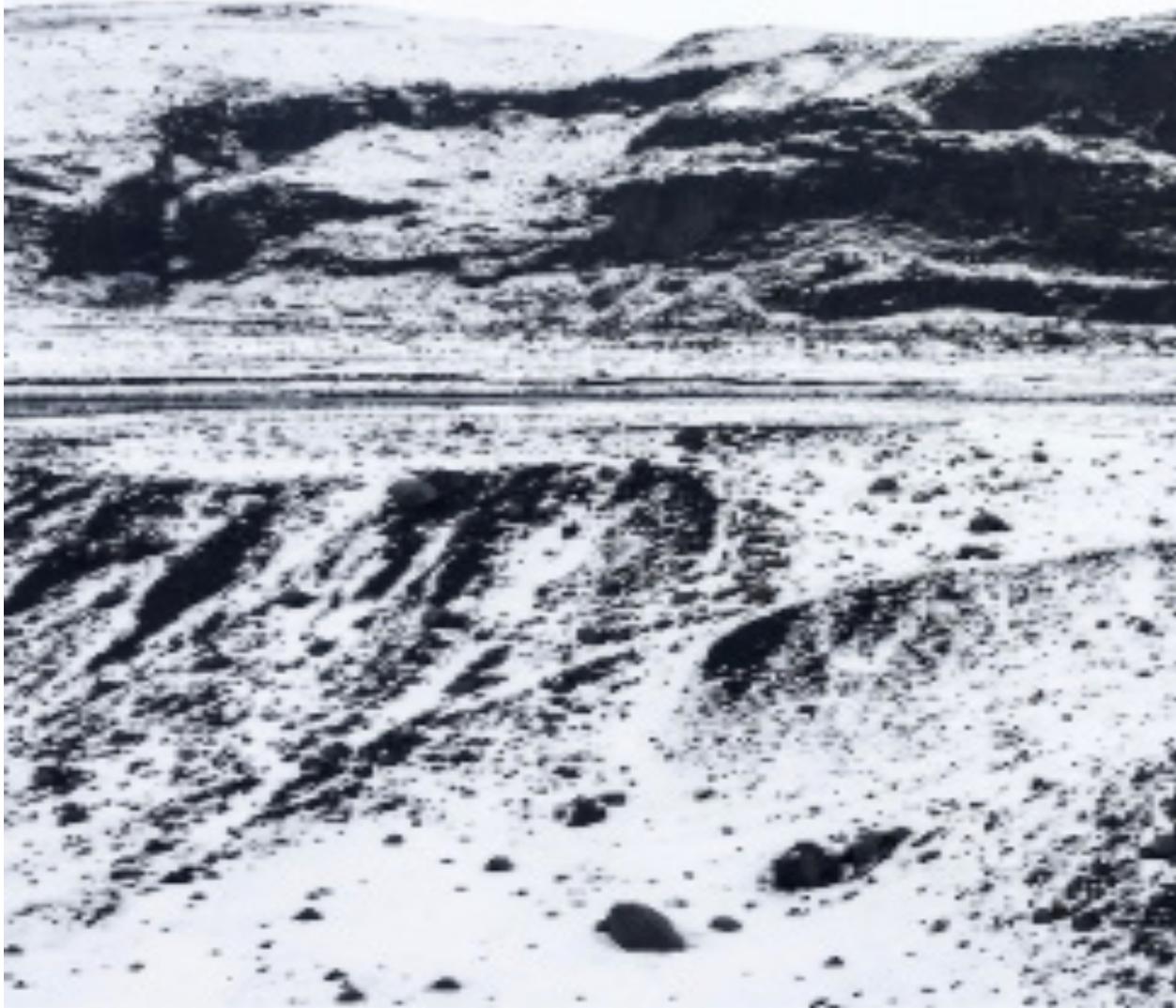
next street and then another and another. In the middle of the street, I spotted a black sequined purse. After a tram passed, I picked it up only to have a cyclist scream in my face for standing in the middle of the road. Opening it, I found €400. My thumb skimmed over the money. €400. In cash. I looked around to find no cop or even drug dealer in sight. Nearly missing it in between the wads of cash, I pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper that turned out to be a bank statement. The bank account number was x'ed out, but listed a name and address: Grace Bailey of Essex, England.

With far too much money for a tourist to be holding onto, the diminishing lights in the storefront and restaurant windows made me want to retreat back to the safety of my hotel. On my way back to Centraal Station, I wondered how I could convincingly explain the way in which the purse came into my possession in case another policeman stopped me. In the station, I tracked down an officer in a yellow traffic jacket and explained the situation. I assumed it would be an easy fix considering the owner's name and address were clearly marked on the paper, but the cop just shrugged. I shook the wallet in his face and explained again. I spoke slowly, hoping it was my English that was the problem, but he shrugged again, and said, "Sorry, I don't know," and walked through the turnstile.

I was left, then, in the station terminal with Grace Bailey's €400. The cop had disappeared down one of the tracks. I wished that the wallet would go away, that someone would handle it. The train line map was in English and the arrows designated clearly, but clutching the wallet in my hand, I had no energy left to navigate the train system. Instead, I headed for the taxi line. The sight of people milling around, going about their night, was a comfort, a reminder I was not truly lost in some strange world. I felt calmed by the idea that each person was probably off to experience the night. That is, until a man also waiting for a cab bent over and vomited all over the street.



The French Alps
snowfall as luminous as
sunspots
“starlight on the strands”
ascend into the woods
to find marmalade and cigarettes
hidden under the snowdrifts



So far, I was not finding answers in Amsterdam. It had only been one night, but considering the drug deal, the lost wallet, and the indifferent policeman, I felt more confused than ever. The masters did not seem to be sending any signals. I went to sleep on the Hotel Schip after contacting Grace Bailey on Facebook, dreaming of dead-end canals.

Apparently, all the strangeness of travel had run its course because the rest of the trip passed in a fairly normal fashion. I woke up early and visited Anne Frank at her house. Up through the steep staircase and into the little room known as her secret annex, I stood in its emptiness for a while, feeling the weight of a place that could have been full. Outside, in the misty overcast, Anne's home disappeared amongst the rows and rows of canal houses. It seemed so distant, so separate from the girls bumping in the night, losing their wallets. Would Anne, given the chance, drop her wallet, too?

For dinner I ate waffles and for breakfast lunch meat. Although tired, I spent hours in the Van Gogh museum, determined to see every sun dappled landscape and disgruntled look Vincent could muster for the canvas. In the Bloemenmarkt, I bought tulip seeds for my grandmother's garden – vivid reds and yellows to compliment her cool colored hydrangeas. I even took some more time to get lost among the canals after eating a "space cake." On my last full night, I tried looking the men and women in the Red Light District in the eye, but found myself only able to watch the neon red lights reflect off the water.

Over the course of my two days, I circled nearly every ring of Amsterdam. I visited at least half of the attractions listed on Trip Advisor. Yet, as I sat on the bus headed out of the center of the city, back towards my Hotel Schip, I couldn't quite piece together the meaning I had been after. It shifted on the surface of my brain like the reflections of light on the water I had studied the night before. Watching the canal houses turn into high-rise apartment complexes, I did not know how to equate drugs dealers and landscape paintings of wheat with missing wallets that had more money in them than the Frank family lived off of for years. How could someone vomit on the street and pick tulips the next morning? How did all of this exist in one place?

The bus stopped in front of a wide, empty street. On one side, block shaped apartments and on the other, an outlet to the North Sea. Large cylindrical buildings and smoke towers made up the skyline on the other side of the bay. No 17th century mansions or coffee houses in sight. Not ready to go to sleep yet, I leaned over the railing of the Hotel Schip and spotted the coal barge floating slowly by. At first, its lifeless machinery confused me just as much as anything else I had seen throughout my trip. A hulking mass, the boat just continued on, transporting its coal, oblivious and uncaring to the rest of the city. It didn't fit in among the artwork or the history, the sordidness or the sophistication. Yet, mesmerized by its incongruent nature, it registered that the jumble and confusion and assortment that was Amsterdam was precisely what makes up the city's meaning. And perhaps, life's, too.

While this vessel seemed to have no place in the city, neither did anything else. In the world, in life, things don't necessarily have places. Places come to exist through people and people journey, in search of a place. I had struggled to find connections between Amsterdam's disjointed parts – its history, its culture, its residents - only to realize there was no connection. This was a city, like any, where a million things happened and are happening and will happen. Amsterdam is the city where Van Gogh tried to paint and Jews tried to hide. It is a city where one can smoke and drink and legally spend the night with prostitutes only to get up in the morning and do it all over again in broad daylight. Trains and ships pass through, people get on and off, tourists trample flowers and then buy seeds. With such multitudes, it is no wonder I could not pinpoint a moment of meaning, a purpose to the city's people and streets. In hazy cafes and neon red rooms, I am not sure how I could have seen a sign from the masters.

Before and even during my trip, the wideness of the world had confused me. I could not easily find meaning or motivation to keep living in it. I was sure I would make a wrong turn, drift out to sea, or stay right where I was, unchanged. But I had wandered down so many alleyways in Amsterdam and rounded so many canals to find that I could always make it out onto the other side. It became enough to simply walk among the violet and night navy canal houses and watch cyclists compete for street space with trams.

Only after the coal barge left the rings of the city completely, becoming a speck on the rim of the North Sea, did I go to sleep.



