

Unwritten

by Brett Garcia Rose

Your body tells my story. I read it with my fingers in the dark, tracing the faint lines as you twist and stretch around the bed, tangled under damp sheets. The noise of the world dwindles to whispers and scrapes and I read, the air inside whirls thin and cold, gliding over your pale skin like invisible knives and I watch as you move and I read, quietly, unwilling and unable to wake you.

Your hands trace slow circles along white sheets, strong hands that changed everything they touched. Your hair, stretched across the pillow, tells of a thousand different nights just like this, of watching and wanting and waiting, and then you turn your body over and it is a new page; your back now, running naked along a beach in some forgotten town before the world caught onto us and I am there with you, for just a moment, until the dream shoves me out.

I hover, and I long, but I don't cry.

Sometimes you tell the bad stories. You wake up screaming and gasping for air, strangling out of the down comforter with sleep cascading down your naked body like ice. You unravel in descending sobs, not awake and not asleep, a small, thrashing thing on your too-big bed. This is when I come out, unable to keep silent any longer. I crash around your room, an animal, a feral, evil force. I howl and I stomp and break everything I touch, screaming and cursing, throwing dressers against walls and sinks against mirrors. I flip beds and tear up carpets and rip through sheetrock with my bloodied fingers, anything to wake you. But nothing does. My voice is a wrath unknown to you, not yet available in your world but all too common in mine. I pace the room amid a total destruction that only I can see and can never repair, and all after a while you fall back to the bed and fold into it, shaking and sinking back to what you now call peace.

My silence is a quicksand surrounded by your dreams.

Later: you brush your hand across your eye and I see the scar where you almost left me, so long ago. Then you turn and I kiss your neck and I can almost taste you, the salt more important to me than air. Then your lips move and you breathe me in, and it is from your eyes that I see the worlds you have created. In these minutes I live my life. These moments, pushed ever forward as the night comes to an end. In these moments, I remember.

You're never really asleep. I am never awake. But as the darkness fades, I read. Your body tells my story.

On your index finger lies your smallest scar. Helping me cook for the first time in my flat and nicking the tip in a small line that bled and hardened over time. That line is your smile now, the shadows in your eyes deep yet still young as you laughed and cried through the pain. That is the line that began us. That line, defined us.

Can you see me? I ask. You can't hear me, but I the answer. These words are my words, I know, but they can never be unspoken. They are written everywhere. Someday, I hope, they will be true.

I can see you.

My hands drift over your body like smoke, transparent and lethal. I say your name into the dark air around me and watch hopefully as the word tears holes in the world. *Rachael*. I say it as prayer. I say it as hope. Sometimes I scream it in demand. *Rachael*. Your name is proof that I have lived.

I run my hands over your strong calves that ran marathons across the continent, even as you got older, laughing the whole time. They are softer and more freckled than I remember, but still strong. We began those lives fearing nothing, never imagining that you'd need to live them alone. We didn't even believe in luck, back then. Our power was absolute. But we were wrong. Luck found us, introduced herself to us just as we were at our very best. That bright sunny day, that moment of utter beauty and unrelenting wonder, that amazing day is the truck that slams through you.

Rachael, I whisper, as I run my hands, just barely, across your life.

Sometimes in the morning you stand in the bathroom and stare at your reflection in the foggy mirror and we both read together. The

lines in your eyes, before you cover them, mark our struggles like the circles in a felled tree record its grandest storms. Those lines are the record of both my happiness and my despair. All of the moments that mattered, all of the moments I can remember now, they all happened with you. Those green eyes are my life.

When you are gone I do not breathe. I cannot see and I cannot hear, but I can feel. It is peaceful in the way I imaging drowning would be peaceful. I do not give that time a word.

Not all of the stories are mine. There are others that I cannot read but I know are there, stories written over mine in a newer, more crude language, pasted like a bad repair and cracking with age and untruth. They are not so much written as they are copied, bastardized from my history and hammered into place by people I cannot see and will not know. This is proof that you have lived.

Our last story. The scar on your abdomen where Samuel came into this world. I trace my fingers across that final scar, faded now and closed like a dead mouth. My fingers barely move, sliding like tired caterpillars. Beautiful, brave Samuel. He entered our lives in stunning silence, far before his time, and there was tremendous dignity in those first moments. I could imagine effortlessly who he would become. A baseball player. A husband and father. An artist or a pianist or a teacher.

By the time Samuel finished his first breath he was already middle-aged. In 40 seconds he would be dead. His heart was just too small for this world. The three of us, we lived and died in those moments. Look up the history of our family, and it is written somewhere, I'm sure, and that's all you'll get. Forty seconds.

I have screamed his name a thousand times, but wherever he is, he cannot hear me.

I died crossing a busy road a few days later. I wasn't looking. I could see the hospital from the street where I lay crumpled and dying as strangers kissed me and pumped my chest. I can tell you, it didn't hurt. Not then. Maybe I even wanted it. I looked for you in the windows but it was too late, and my eyes too tired. I remember thinking, at the very end, that I would find Samuel, that I might have

a chance to know him, and if you had seen me in those last moments I may even have smiled. But I was wrong. I was wrong about everything.

I'm sorry.

You were the strong one after that. I bear witness to your grace and courage, every beat of your heart a sledgehammer against the world, against me and probably even against God himself. You accepted your loss and everyone else's along with it, helping every person you touched. You will live in the hearts of strangers, forever. will live, forever.

You would go through two wars without me. Illness, lovers, poverty and wealth, another marriage and new children. You fought for your life, and made sure every moment was worth it, and I have watched it all; with hope, with pride, with envy and sorrow. But everything does end.

You lie in a small cottage in your hometown back in Ireland, tired and old, surrounded by machines, by people who love you crying and numb, by somber doctors and nurses who pump poison. It is your last day. I recognize you, but only just. Still, with each breath you fight for and win, you smile, and I read your tired face and I wonder, as I always have, whether our moments are worth the price we pay to pass through them.

I watch quietly from a corner, wishing upon you this last privacy but as has been true for the last half-century, I cannot look away. I have watched you across an ocean of time, and am honored to be your witness. But it is the mystery of life that sustains me now, watching you fight to the very end, and I know, now, that you remember too. You close your eyes and I watch you say goodbye to your world as I did to ours so many years ago, and the room itself takes a deep breath and holds it in, as if even the objects contained within it, the chairs and walls and lights and the machines that could not save you, even these unfeeling things somehow register the loss. I hover in the dead air above you with our foreheads touching and watch your green-grey eyes. You see me, for just a moment, finally, and as you gently push away I say your name one last time.

Rachael.

