

S O A K

PALE BOY PICKS A SUNFLOWER FROM A VOLCANO

He scribbled poems on every one of my petals and swallowed them one by one just to be closer.

I think I was in the middle of a bloom. Or a death. I was engulfed in this sea of hard shadows and it reeked of peppermint oil and copper and bleach-- a gaseous texture that's not unlike your hands. Still, I was driving across oceans in an old silver Subaru and I was soaked with sea salt and fish foam. I never did get there. It's not that my roads were gushing or that my irises burst; in fact, I think I felt like sunflowers there with you. I was like pollen and yellow and petals, but floating in the wind, an astronaut in space. But you were never really there with me, a vacancy the depth of a slow, meandering blink. Yes. That's what it was: sunflowers with little bits of galaxies in their sun streams and I held them for you. I just held them.

I could never understand how he saw the sun beneath my skin, behind my mascara and eyeliner and drawn-on freckles. When he told me that he wrote poetry about me, I felt a yellow flicker in my chest, but I pushed it down as far as I could. Maybe it came out when I laughed. I think he was the only one that saw it, so he reached his hand into my ribcage and rummaged for a meadow: long stretches of pollen and petals, striped bees extracting sweet sugar, big sunflower in the baby blue sky swathing tart rays around the clouds, the stems, our legs. It felt good, but I think I always knew he'd never find what he was looking for.

There were icicles last February when we went to that concert. You bought us dinner from Village Inn but I felt like I didn't deserve it so I only ordered coffee and french fries, the former

far too bitter and the latter under-salted. You ordered an omelet splattered with mozzarella and cheddar, stuffed with red and green bell peppers, and sprinkled with thin bits of a pinkish ham.

He slowly peeled the top off of the little creamers that come with a pot of coffee. After pouring two into his cup, he opened a third and drank it like a shot of liquor. As I poured salt over my plate, he added three packets of raw sugar to his coffee. It all dissolved into one pool of tan that he tipped into his lips. Such pale lips.

I hated pork and peppers and that's what your breath smelled like for the rest of the night, but we didn't kiss anyway. You drove too fast down Colfax and the black acid and oil from dinner splashed around the bottom of my esophagus. We went inside and let the music pour into us, close enough for breath to intertwine: peppers and coffee. It clearly didn't match, but I continued to hold you close.

He put his arm around my shoulder as I screamed lyrics. In the smoke and lights, I felt his hand resting on my waist; the shape of his breath on my neck left my lips tingling. I leaned in and out of him; I was scared of getting too close to his sighs. We looked at each other, but he never kissed me and I was fine, neon and warm.

I never had the courage to press my lips to yours, and I regretted it as we stepped into the rain. I didn't want the coins or bills in my pockets to rust or rip; a kiss would have been a good umbrella.

I didn't need it. I thought I wanted it, but I didn't need it. The whole ride home, we listened to songs about heartbreak. I knew he was like those songs: red and silent and aching.

When we drove around that lake near your neighborhood, I could smell the geese feathers and hisses skipping across the surface. The sun set slowly over the lake, purple and orange knotting up and reflecting in the huge man-made mirror. I could see your reflection, too, with frizzy blonde hair, small hands, tiny beauty marks dotting your cheek and upper lip, two dark lakes of your own sunk into your skull. I grabbed your hand as I drove; your palm sweat and my hand became soaked in your atoms.

I let him slide his fingers into my hand but they didn't fit like I thought they would. His were too small and I needed something larger, something that could hold my explosions and shrapnel. I looked at him driving and felt like a stranger in that car. I decided to let go because it's easier that way.

I adored the drip into my pores but you drew your hand back to your lithe body. I should have strode into that little lake, let the algae dress my skin and pull me deeper until I was gone. Maybe you would have dove in after me, looked into me and placed your mouth on mine, saliva and sunset water filling each other.

He parked and laid his head in my lap, looking up at me with eyes that were shovels. He dug into me and I couldn't take it any longer.

We didn't kiss that night; your dad caught us before we could and I ached for your cherry Carmex and drawn on freckles as I watched you go back into your house and melt into the white string lights hanging in your room.

I always felt little explosions in me and my ribs must have been fractured. I pretended like I didn't hurt and I let my skin keep me whole. It was a war inside of me and I just wanted the heat and debris to leave. I wanted to be his meadow, but I was ravaged. Never a complete body. My insides couldn't function properly, so how could I ever give it to him?

I hated how dry my hands felt on the steering wheel.

I hated the cold, so I let him in to keep me warm. When the weather was gray, I didn't want to lose the yellow he gave me. I let the charcoal dye in my hair fade back to blonde, I wore a cropped yellow sweater; I painted my nails with the sun. I even went to a tattoo parlor with him, let him sit next to me as an artist jabbed a needle into my arm with golden ink. He smiled when he saw the sunflower bursting off of my skin.

I wondered how wet it is up there in the January stratosphere. Christmas lights were still strung up like multi-colored sequins on slinky slip dresses.

I only ever let him graze the waistbands of my jeans. I never wore dresses.

What would it be like to live inside those globes brimming with sparkly pools, swimming through with tiny white flakes falling around us? People think that snow globes are only filled with water, but most of them have a deadly antifreeze solution to ensure that they remain unfrozen during delivery.

I have a collection of snow globes I bring out for Christmas. I don't have one that has fields of sun petals. It would be strange to have snow on sunflowers.

I drank you and I didn't freeze; but the globe we were in was filled with magma so that didn't matter much anyway.

I loved sunflowers because of him because that's what he made me out to be. I always felt warm when he wrote sunflowers onto his pages. I know that I didn't deserve it, but I couldn't live without it. I never asked him to eat my petals. I had to keep my pollen to myself.

I thought that you were blooming, that your skin was meadows and the sun had planted its seed in your pores. *I was gray, gone with big bursts of fire inside but it hurt so I kept him away.* But, I was the one who planted it and you grew vaster and more yellow. *He was outside in his Subaru waiting to tell me he's through but I didn't think he could do it.* No. You weren't a sunflower, you were a volcano: magma-melted atoms and ash. *My nails were red this time. My hands were glowing red, pulsing red, dripping red.* A thin layer of skin hid your burn. I should have known that when the rain came and washed your petals away, your bones would disintegrate like paper in a flame. *I couldn't ask him for any help. I had to leave.* Your mouth poured lava and steam;

you vomited crime and imprisonment, not the sun. *I wasn't enough, never enough, never will be enough.* Your ribs were everywhere, and I know that I didn't break them. Who did? *He couldn't fix them, and I melted into a puddle of bones and fake eyelashes and red nail polish.* As eruption dripped from your oily eyelids, I saw that your meadows were orange and flowing. *Leave me, please, I needed him to go or I'd have to.* Those galaxies eventually turned to gray as they hit the air, but I still had your petals. *I will never be his sunflower.* I held them. I let them go.

I had to.

PALE BOY BURNS THE WORDS, THE PAGES

I don't like to be lonely like this

wondering why our hands don't have agency

why it's so burnt in this room?

I pick flowers for vases I don't have,
hiding them from the cold in oversized anoraks
and unzipping them to reveal that they've all just died
from the heat of your cayenne and boil and lava and nebulas.

I need someone to
grab my nose and pull it down, unzip
my face, my throat, my chest and reveal
the poppies shooting up between my bizarre
ribs and the wine dripping down the stems into my
carnivore caverns, the blaze of ghost meadows hidden by

shiny

silky

skin.

Sometimes when I'm gone,
I run my hands under hot water until they are red
and I raise them to the mirror and see the oil and tears and magma
mixing so I punch my reflection until my fingers are wet again and
it's that soak that stains

the sink

my sweater

the drain

my toes

the tile

but never

us.

I lose my voice when my heartbeats.

Here I am--

filling

filling up, filling in, filling out, filling

with liquid sunshine and beer and acid,

never enough water and I can't really hold it all

and I'll burst

up, out, in

the garden growing in the toilet,

welcoming my sunflowers,

and I flush them,

the wet pollen falls away--

PALE BOY GETS STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

I was submerged like a jellyfish in the sea when I saw you across the dance floor, neon lights blasting around the room like marbles bouncing underwater. Your eyes were seafoam and that's what took my breath away; not the suffocating sweat daringly dripping onto my shoulders and feet, not the vodka sloshing in my cheeks, but those piercing eyes that sunk into me.

Everyone said that I have electricity in my eyes. Everyone stared. I couldn't escape it. Sometimes, I wished that my eyes really were electric, that I could shoot bolts of lightning and burn everyone in sight, just so that they would stop wrapping their desires around my tan skin. I tried to strike him across the dancefloor, but not necessarily to electrocute him. He looked so bright as if he'd already been burned by something but had resurfaced with shining skin. When he approached me, I wondered if he'd taste the Sex on the Beach that I drank. I hoped my lips were sweet.

When we kissed, it was gentle, a subtle rain on my skin, only this time it didn't sizzle; it just glistened. Outside, I tried to be alluring as you sipped on free water, placing your hand on the brick wall just above my shoulder. I was locked into your body but never felt trapped. When you moved your hand just above my waist, I thought *I'm as electric as his fingers*.

I noticed the way he walked, confident and unwavering like he knew exactly where he was going. He walked on those neon flashes like they were stairs and we were suddenly floating above the sway and writhe of the bodies beneath us.

As my friends and I rode in the Uber on the way back home, I saw you buzz by in your charcoal-colored car. It had rained a bit, and the roads were wet, so why wasn't the car washed off? What volcano had erupted to form such a thick layer of ash? Maybe it was in you, bursting from your gut when you screamed. You didn't seem burnt, but we were underwater, snorkeling in city streams. I couldn't think about drowning because I had never been touched like that before.

I saw him as I drove away, a tingle still on my lips and it was as if I could be both electric and swimming without sizzling.

You took me to buy late-night coffee and the first thing I noticed was the mural of *Cafe Terrace at Night*, the clumsily drawn stools and shapeless figures oozing tangerine and gold, navy and eggshell strokes.

He stood there in awe looking at the paint adorning brick. He told me that it was his mother's favorite painting. I imagined him sitting on that terrace, a stroke of paint and he would drip into the sky.

Then there was the bar: used mugs with leftover foam, shot glasses brimming with rum or tequila or vodka, scattered sea salt, dried lime juice, pennies and nickels and one dollar bills for tips, someone's forgotten sunglasses, a dirty dishrag, an oval plate with scrambled eggs, half-empty bottle of ketchup, crumpled up napkins. After the bartender took our order, we sat on two large stools with worn red leather seats standing below a chessboard pretending to be a table.

The stereo was blasting music but I could still hear him breathing.

Next to us was a raggedy salon chair, edges frayed, yellowing seat cover, fuzz peeking out of cracks. *I'm steaming*, I thought as I gulped espresso and milk, wondering what European woman conceptualized such electricity and buzz from the bitter smell of coffee beans roasting. It didn't matter; I forgot about her as soon as you let me sip your drink because I swore I could taste your tongue on the straw.

When we kissed in his room later that night, I moved down his neck, caressing his goosebumps and heartbeats with my lips. I began to press harder, more eagerly against his chest. I wanted to mark him, leave splashes of bruises like pomegranate juice spilled on a white shirt. I sucked furiously at his clavicles because that is where skin was the thinnest. I thought that the more purple he was, the less he could leave.

You drove me to the middle of nowhere one night, where ghosts supposedly left handprints on windshields. It was the second time we ventured out into the expansive darkness; the first time we reclined in your leather seats and counted how many shooting stars we could see zipping through the sky.

I think I saw ten and he only six because he was a novice star-gazer.

This time, we discussed religion and you said *I feel like sin*, and I couldn't understand how salvation about the stars could be so slippery. My thoughts were interrupted by the flashing red

and blue fireworks from the cop car behind us, but we weren't in trouble; he simply wanted to know why we were driving such luxury on dirt roads.

I wondered if the scent of sex had latched onto my leather seats. It had to have soaked into the threads.

On our way back home, I questioned you about your sin and you were so angry, so hurt, so bruised. Our words were interrupted by a sudden braking for a porcupine crossing the road; I imagined the blood splattering on the rims and the needles spraying into the tires and realized that sin has spikes, too.

It was all so wet. I thought he'd slip away and I'd be left with the ephemeral hint of his skin on my leather.

We kissed after apologizing and you held me in your arms, allowing the smell of skin and cologne wash over me and I was reminded why I loved your touch--euphoria.

I still felt the needle pinch of electricity as our lips touched.

If you had needles, I could live with adoring you from afar, as long as your hands were still soft and still willing to sin with me like lightning does the earth.

I never wanted to simply be enough. I needed to be more.

One rainy Wednesday, you bought me a strip of neon lights that changed colors. I chose red when we kissed, thinking that the heat would sink into our skin when we took our clothes off. We began to tangle our bodies together: first, our legs; second, our hands and fingers; third, our mouths and then we were so much more than two people inside of each other.

His paleness was exhilarating and I was always eager to yank his clothes off of his body. Every tendon, every popping vein, every little blonde hair was beautiful.

We became red and sweaty and we dripped in saliva and short breaths until we finished in a flood of scattered moans and closed eyes. You switched the light to yellow because you said that it's better to fall asleep to. I shut my eyes because yellow was like the sun and invasive and made me ache, and I had to keep telling myself *I'm wet* just to make sure my pores wouldn't burst into flames.

He was going somewhere else in this golden glow, which wrapped around his curls like a halo. But, this time, I was the one floating.

You laid your head down next to mine and I was falling asleep as you gently scratched my back, only digging your nails deep enough to tickle and send shivers through my body. You thought I had drifted, and the rawest poem poured from your mouth.

You're absolutely perfect.

You didn't know that I had heard you, that I had felt your voice sink into my skin. You turned over after a while so I wrapped my arm around you. I think we could have slept in the pouring rain without waking up; that's how deep we fell.

I knew that he had been burned and he was still washing the char away. I couldn't fathom who could have destroyed someone so terribly. Or maybe it was done beautifully, because he was a poem worth reading. Sometimes it's better to love someone from far away; but I wanted to love him closely every day and every night.

We always want to draw on foggy windows--hearts, love letters, names, finger paintings of sorts-- but I kept mine to myself that night we drove around the city. Instead, I admired the droplets pattering on tint until I noticed that the streets are soaked, a sinless soothe of lava boiling underground.

He stopped talking and I knew poetry had begun to rain in his brain just as it fell from the sky, scattering bits of cloud and electricity and wet onto these streets.

I thought to myself *I'm flooding*. Your BMW stopped at a red light, and I was cast in the fluorescent glow of sunsets sliced in half before dark, spewing spinal fluid and blood cells where wheels stopped. That was before it turned to alien guts, a neon squirt of lime stain on the concrete that you drove through; I couldn't think about bloodshed anymore so I looked at your hands holding leather and you slowly moved your right hand to place it in my palm.

I could tell that he felt uncomfortable in my hands, almost as if I would make a fist and crush his bones. I just wanted to hold him. When his fingers finally relaxed, he squeezed a little tighter and I knew that his skin and organs needed embrace to flow freely.

Our fingers interlocked and I felt sharks swimming in us, flaring their gills to breathe in our bodies and gnawing at our bones until we were nothing but scuba suits of skin; but I couldn't think about hollowness anymore so I dove into caffeine and was embalmed by raw cinnamon and Van Gogh paintings in a 24-hour coffee shop.

That coffee shop that I took him to became his favorite and it became a place where the city, the stars, the cars, the hands accumulated into a sea. He couldn't swim, but he loved to let the waves crash into him over and over until he was soaked.

Your eyes tasted like almonds and espresso, not sweet like mine but deeper and dripping with rarities and we ended up in a park under amber street lights where the monkey bars and swings and slides were glossed in honey --not blood like in the city-- but a sugary coat of sex that your knees felt as you took all of me in your mouth.

The air was freezing and damp; droplets of water dripped down the primary-colored playground metal. The risk tasted sweet. My skin felt damp, but my fingers were electric; it felt right transmitting my lightning into him.

Walking the trail back to the car was cold and the bottoms of my shoes were sticky but your hands held mine again, so I bounced just fine. I changed when I got home, body almost completely covered in warm knit, yet my skin was still rain-glazed -- everlastingly wet.

PALE BOY SOAKS THE WORDS, THE PAGES

Unruly hair and shivers after sex,
lava lamp glow and kaleidoscopes
the short waft of peppermint and latex.

I knew the liver, kidneys, intestines, lungs, heart.

I wanted to know the bones.

Here's my sternum, ribcage, femur, tibia and fibula, skull, pelvic bone.

Can he kiss my hips?

The biggest organ in the body is the skin

And his lips told me that

I'm so beautiful. Everywhere.

Even my organs.

Especially my heart.

How can he see them all?

They're so hard to find behind my skin,
too easy to lose in this dusk.

Bones and muscles and organs and the deep red of it all --
He's found the living and static in me.

This room:

It has butterflies painted on its bricks--

molting monarch mortar

never sunflowers

There are names and places only we know.
I call this one Peninsula,
Only because our fingers graze each other.

He told me that it had rained and
I rushed out because I needed the scent,
the linger and thunderstorm of a soak but
the wet was like unmelted raw sugar
at the bottom of a teacup yet
the road still welcomed my feet
as I stood looking up
at two sinewy branches from either side of the street
almost touching,
never kissing
and it was only 32 degrees,
still winter so
the sky was cedary and strewn and blue but
somehow I didn't yearn for the sun.

There are names and places only we know.
I call this one Ours,
Only because this touch is where the rain begins.

I didn't know what history tasted like until I was burned

I stood there

then

agape

now

I swim there

I know what tomorrow tastes like because I am soaked