

Quiet Midnight World

"Our souls belong together," she said, "like this gold and this shell—
Somewhere, sometime, on earth or in heaven, we shall surely meet."
And she sent him, by his messenger, a sentence reminding him
Of vows which had been known only to their two hearts:
"On the seventh day of the Seventh-month, in the Palace of Long Life,
We told each other secretly in the quiet midnight world
That we wished to fly in heaven, two birds with the wings of one,
And to grow together on the earth, two branches of one tree."
Earth endures, heaven endures; some time both shall end,
While this unending sorrow goes on and on for ever.

—Bai Juyi, from *A Song of Unending Sorrow*, trans. Bynner

The years go by.

They go by in a shifting blur of blood and blossoms; days to weeks, weeks to months, months to years—years that run on for forever.

At least, that's what she tells him. Not that he would know.

"Aidan, what is it like, being mortal?"

He loves the way she says his name. The way her mouth moves when she says it, the inflection she uses. The way her voice falls and rises with the syllables, "Ehh-din;" she doesn't say his name like anyone else. The first syllable long and soft, the next short and gentle. No one else says his name quite like her.

Then again, there's no one else like her.

The years go by too fast.

They're like a snowball: small, fitting into the palm of his hand, and then, as he rolls them along gathering dusty layers of white, dense and over-bearing. After the snowball becomes something he can no longer control, he feels it will crush him, and then his life will end.

At least, that is what he says it is like. She would not know.

The first time she had asked him what it was like to be mortal, he replied with his ever-present smile. "I don't know." He shrugged. "It's—I don't get it. I mean, I know I'll die, but I don't care. Is that strange?" He looked at her with clear eyes, but did not wait for a response. "But I'm growing older," he said with more conviction, "so I think I understand it a bit more." He paused and looked away, a faint smear of red across the cheeks as his shoulders tensed. "Sorry, I sound really foolish, don't I?"

"But it is not time I asked you about; I asked you about mortality."

For once his smile dimmed. His voice was quiet as if he were convincing himself. "You did—that's what you asked."

But then he turned towards her and flashed another smile, and she felt that everything was alright in her world.

Because she has always adored his smile, that a mere pulling of the lips could reveal so much. She had never understood smiles and their meanings; once Aidan had found her, she understood. No one can make her understand things like her Aidan can. Then again, there had been no one before him. .

And Aidan is special, even if he does not know it.

To her, time is nothing. It goes on and on, unchanging. It is like a flower blooming: watch it blossom, watch it die, watch the wilted petals fall to the ground, turn your eyes to the next seedling. She makes no distinction between eras: they are all the same to her—faces and names change, but choices never do. If she wants to, she can wave her hand and hazard when wars will occur and the flags of revolution raised. She does not bother though; it holds no interest of hers. Even so, she had thought she had seen everything until Aidan came.

Aidan is nothing more than a smudge in the fading archives of history. He is a new face, how he has escaped her eyes all these years she does not know, but she will see others like him after he dies. He cannot be unique out of the millions of faces she has looked upon with disinterest.

But still, something tells her, Aidan is special. She wonders what it is that makes him so.

When she first met him, she asked, "What can you possibly offer me to seek refuge here?"

She was vain, this she knows now, and she could not see.

He smiled, and she was puzzled when she realized she had never seen one like it before. She leaned forward, her eyes stayed to his face, the gravity of a mystery pulling her in. Something she had never seen. . .

She did not hear him at first, but when the warm breeze carried his, "Nothing," to her ear, his voice became the wind, a warm sigh running through her chest that made her shudder, blowing through her, whispering:

i.

Things pass by and I can't even remember where to stop and when to start again. It's jumbled up, all these encounters, but just a faint scent on the breeze is enough to remind me.

There are flowers in her garden, a myriad of color in her enclosed world. The small, unopened buds always fascinate and enthrall her. Not yet in bloom—although she has seen them in season before, she always wonders if one day she will find open petals of a different color.

She gazes at the empty archway with tiny yellow buds, wondering what it would be like to leave here—but she discards the idea. The wind blows hard against her. She shuts her eyes and hears the snap of her dress in the sudden gale, fighting the frantic lash of her hair with a twist of her face and a raised hand.

"What do you do with your life when it is so short? What do you strive for when you know you will likely die before it ever happens?"

She is met with silence and then he replies to her, looking out into the distance, his face away from her. "What I want most of all. . . is," he replies to the horizon and not to her, "something that will never be mine, no matter how much I run."

"Like time?"

"No, not like that. Because time is completely impossible, and this. . . I know I can catch up." He presses his lips tightly and turns his head sharply. "No, no, that's not right." His hand runs through his hair, the nails scraping against his scalp. "It's. . ." He pauses and moves his mouth trying to find the proper word. "Maybe because I want it so badly. . ." His mouth twists even more, and now his brows meet, his eyes unfocused.

She can almost hear what he does not say. She has heard it before; so many times, she would have lost count if she had bothered to try. She has heard the music keened and drawn across the rosined bows, seen the pieces of paper fill with ink. Love is a word she knows—a bottle of ink shattered in a moment of an anger, the paper slowly bleeding black; petals crushed under bare feet, slowly sinking into the mud—but does not understand.

But she understands pain, and she does not ask him again; the look upon his face is too much for her to bear.

Time is a void to her. An abyss that goes on forever and ever. A pit that never ends and leaves her free falling through the darkness that is loneliness. She has seen empires rise and fall, millions of lives hanging by dancing string shorn in a single moment, their bodies lying like useless dolls; what is the point of it all? What is her purpose in this long chain of events that is history, that is time? Is she here only to stand as a witness, never to—she stops these thoughts; they only stymie her.

She had spoken only once, when she was born, when she was created, when she looked into the eyes of her creator on bended knees and spoke her name to him.

She had not spoken since, not until Aidan came along.

She had been lonely, standing in the whirlwind alone—until he came, lending the air a new quality, a sublimation, and she too could not resist the change; a storm she could not name. But Aidan would leave her eventually, and she would be alone once more. She would go on until the earth eroded and the stars faded. He would not.

She has so many questions, and although her watching through the years answers some, she thinks it best to ask and hear it from a mortal's own mouth.

"Aidan, what is time like when you are mortal?"

His initial response is visceral and quick. "It goes by too quickly. I never have enough time to stop and catch my breath." But then he is silent for awhile and she waits. His words come out in a rush that reminds her of the spring thaw that floods streams. She is surprised by what he knows. Every word, clear and carefully pronounced.

"Time is something I am forever chasing but cannot catch. I feel that if I can capture it, I can retain all that is good in the world; but at the same time, I know it's not possible. Nor can I help the way I chase it, as foolish as that might be." His stance is subtly strong, a hip leaning to the side, hands reappearing from pockets; he is vindicated in this moment. "Time is something precious that I am always losing; something that can never be regained. I think time is so big I can't even imagine half of it."

"No," she replies to the emptiness, "No, you can't."

ii.

The bonds we have created; the bonds nurtured by all the time we shared—these bonds must be torn apart. Because things must break for a mending, and there must be a separation for an exile to end.

"I have seen many things, Aidan. Past, present, future, it is all the same to me. I have seen it all before. I have seen everyone important who has ever been in this world, their faces change but their deeds do not." Her hand touches her cheek; her face has always been the same. She lifts her eyes along with her hand towards his. "Never have I met anyone like you, never in all my existence. I feel I never will again." The need to feel his skin and know this face is strong, but her finger draws a swift line through the air, letting her hand fall away and hang uselessly on the edge of the bench.

"Am I not important, then?"

"No, you are very important."

"I don't think you understand what that means, really." His smile is neither joyous nor sad.

"No, I do not." She pauses, and taps her finger against the corner of her mouth. She looks up at him standing across from where she sits. "Do you believe you are immortal now, in your own strange, mortal fashion?"

"No." He smiles sheepishly, but it fades away and is replaced by something shining that has nothing to do with the tilting beams of light tumbling through the trees. "I am thinking of something entirely different."

She is disappearing. She always has been: sometimes it is slow, and now so quickly she begins to feel the stirrings of what could be fear. Sometimes she looks down at her hands and wonders if it is all in her head: that her hands are almost translucent for a brief moment, but after she blinks there is no proof.

But it happens time after time, and she wonders if her isolation is not beginning to corrode the edges of her memory; the scorched corners of old papers curling in on itself. It seems that the more she changes, the more she feels like she is disappearing.

Bit by bit. Particle by particle. Everything rising from her body and dissipating into the air.

She wonders, but now, she clenches her fists and knows that it does not matter.

One day she simply states, "I will never die, I will go on forever and ever until the earth dies and the stars die."

"Yes, you will," he acknowledges.

She turns her face to him, her long hair sliding across her shoulder. "So will you, Aidan."

Grinning, he places his hands in his pockets and dips his head towards her, his weight on his heels. "Really?"

"You doubt me?"

He is still smiling, only somehow it is empty. "No, but even you cannot stop death."

iii.

Time is something forever marching onward. Slowing and racing, it never stops. Time places its mark, and I know that these few encounters will only and ever occur once. They are gone forever in its passing. That is why I feel we could never stay this way forever.

"You've changed," he says.

"Really? I," she collects herself and looks for words, "had thought so as well. The garden seems so much smaller now. Perhaps my memory is fading?" she muses wistfully.

He tilts his head and looks at her askew. "Yes, when you grow up everything's not quite as large as it used to."

"What do you speak of?"

He laughs loudly. "Haven't you noticed? We used to be the same height, and now you're up to my chest!" He places his hand a little below his heart.

"You make no sense," she says, "Your growth only means you are now taller than I."

"No, I may have gotten taller, but if you hadn't either, you would barely reach my waist!"

"I have never grown," she says with a shake of her head. "This is different."

"Well, now you have. And it's not different, everyone does." He gives a happy, broad grin and she wonders what exactly there is to feel so happy about. She feels her lips contorting into an unfamiliar shape, a strange reply to his crescent moon of a mouth, but she settles her lips back into a more familiar position.

She sees Aidan watching her struggle, and he laughs even louder than before.

"What is it?" she asks.

He continues to laugh and shakes his head.

When he says she is changed, she does not believe she truly has. She has never changed, and never will. The earth does not change—mountains grow and rivers change their flow, but there is nothing that truly changes—and neither does she. But Aidan is not like her, and he is different and the same.

He still possesses the same smile that she can spend hours watching in fascination—he fascinates her, which has never happened before. Still fills her with the urge to rest her head in her hands and kick her bare feet while looking at him: the essence that is Aidan has not changed; he is still the young boy she knows.

But he is different, she had heard with stifled interest—her head leaning forward, and her eyes half closed to hide her interest—his voice break and settle into its pleasant timbre. He is taller now, too, and has lost all the weight of his youth. Maybe only the surface has changed?

No, no, that is not it. There is something inextricably different. The deepening sense of self: he knows who he is. His childishness has given way into certainties that have been hammered and chiseled onto his heart in a way that can never be erased. He no longer stumbles over his words, and she often finds herself doing so.

What is the difference between the two of them?

"Why are you crying?"

He looks up at her, startled. In all the years they have known each other, she has never seen him cry. He opens his mouth and licks his lips. His teeth and tongue form words, but she cannot hear the whisper he speaks in; the breeze does not carry his voice.

She alights from her bench to draw him down beside her; she has held him here before and she will do so again. She gently tugs his shirt and he pulls inside himself. She is afraid; he has never done this.

He falls down into the grass; his shoulder presses into hers and knocks her down as well. She feels a bit dazed; the back of her neck hit the cold marble on the way down. She notices her legs stiffly placed in front of her, and the warmth of their sides pressed together. She smells something strange but not unpleasant. She sniffs and turns her head and realizes it is Aidan. She is surprised.

He murmurs a "sorry" and picks her up by the waist and places her on the bench. He sits down beside her, arms resting on his legs. There is an absence of something now—her waist is cold. His elbows rest on his knees, his hands grasped. His head leans down to meet his hands, and on the strain of his neck she can see something.

Her head jerks abruptly, and she touches the collar of his shirt with trembling fingers, and then tugs it aside, and sees the purple and red marks. She follows the marks—some of them she can tell are older, this is where the black ink rises off his skin—her hands now shaking, and skips down his sleeves where they end just below.

He turns his head to gaze at her, and in the opening of his shirt she sees mottled marks that will form vines of ink below his breastbone when the swelling disappears.

"Don't look at me like that," he says, and his voice is strong and does not crack.

"I have seen those marks before."

"You would've. You watch, and you see."

She finds it hard to say, she chokes on the words but she forces them out. "How long have you had the mark?"

He rubs the place between heart and collar, and clenches the fabric between his fingers. "You know," his voice is gentle.

"Before I knew you, then."

"Yes. Years and years before."

"The design is finished now. You will be going to fight. When?"

There is a moment of silence as she places her hand over his, and he breaks it. "You know what I am going to tell you."

She draws her hand away. "I do not want to hear it now. Please."

He could tell her that ignoring the truth does not change anything, and she is grateful he does not say so.

She takes his head into her lap once more, and he does not object. She strokes his hair, and does not tell him everything will be alright. She think that this time, it might be more for her sake than his.

"When?"

"Soon."

"Then. . . may I. . . ask something of you?"

"Of course."

"Return."

He half-wakes, placing his arms on her thighs and raises his head to rest on her shoulder and sighs. She shakes from the toes up, and knows that if she looked, she would see nothing of herself. She is tired, and she rests her head against his, never expecting to sleep. She sleeps, and together, they smile at their dreams.

"There is war, Aidan."

He looks her in the eyes and replies quite solemnly, "Yes, there is."

"I have seen this before, but now I am no longer sure of how things will be. Something tells me that you will become important; I imagine your will and decisions will change the earth itself. You will create a new path in history that I have not seen and may never again." Her hand rises of its own volition, reaching for his cheek, but this time instead of letting her hand fall against her summer dress, her fingertips graze his cheek. "So go, Aidan. Go, and I will give you my blessings in your endeavors." As her fingers come to rest by her side again, she catches the fabric above his heart, unintentionally.

"Thank you." He closes his eyes and turns away with his head down.

And with hesitant steps, he walks away with hands in his pockets. He pauses near the archway and raises his head, letting the wind blow by, mussing his hair. She watches his back disappear, and cannot understand why there is a sudden heaviness in her chest. Cannot understand why she is disappointed that he does not stop to look back.

He is gone, and she is alone once more in her garden.

There is night in her world. She sits upon the lonely marble bench, carved by the earth itself for her. Her hands on the marble, feeling her nails bend against its strength. She swings her legs, her toes brushing the grass with every arc, but they slow and slow without her thinking, and her head tilts towards the sky.

Her garden's sky has always been unclear, a vagueness she assumes is blue, but now, it is different.

A deep darkness, the endless abyss of the ocean. Pinholes of light, sparkles off the waves. She has never seen either until now. The mists part from her garden, blown by the wind, and the three-quarters moon shines through, lapping upon the shore.

And the knowledge ripples from her chest outward that the full moon is coming.

iv.

I choose now—of all times, I choose now to hear your voice and forget that there is a world outside of here.

“Aidan,” she says looking to the sky slowly, softly.

“Yes?”

“Your name. . . It rolls off my tongue easily. It is a good name.”

He smiles. “Thanks.”

One day, he is strange. His easy disposition is temporarily misplaced and is transmuted into the awkward nature she often sees in adolescents. No, no, that is wrong, it is as if some unease has set itself into his body and that is why his body twitches and moves unexpectedly: a body rejecting the foreign.

His mouth moves strangely, no quirking of lips into a smile. Instead, he bites his lip and looks like he is fighting the words coming out. In the end, he cannot stop them.

“You are cold.”

“Cold?” she queries. “I am never cold; I feel neither the depth of the frost nor the blaze of the sun, everything is pleasant.” She does not mention that neither come to her garden.

“No, you don’t understand.” The words stumble out again and she can see his hands snapping in his pockets. “You are always cold, and you don’t care. You said so yourself: you don’t feel the sunlight.” She is confused, but he continues on before she can reply. “No warmth from the sunlight? That’s meaningless!”

She steps closer to him and places her hands on his forehead as she has seen mortals do before. “Are you sick, Aidan? This is unlike you.”

She moves her hands to his cheeks and temples; she does not remember exactly where mortals place their hands, only that it is on the face.

His mouth opens once more to spit out bitterness, but she grabs his hands unexpectedly and leads him to the marble bench.

“Sit,” she says. He does so and looks at her in confusion. She kneels in front of him so she is looking up at him. She remembers mothers who tuck their children in bed when ill. “I think you should sleep.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but he notices their hands in his lap, and nothing comes out.

“No,” she says, “Go to sleep. I will watch over you.” When he does not move, she speaks again, “Keep me company, then?”

He looks up from their rocking hands, and a “yes” tumbles from his lips.

Her eyes smile, but her mouth does not; the movement is unfamiliar to her mouth. She rises, and the breeze twists her dress around her ankles as she sits beside him.

Time passes, and eventually his eyes close and he falls asleep.

She watches him. And then, she pulls his body from her shoulder and lays his head to rest in her lap.

She lets his breathing lull her mind, and her hands loosen their grip on the gentle curve of the bench.

But these memories mean little. She has a soldier at war, and now she understands why women will wait by windowsills. And now she understands what the hours and seconds that slowly toll mean.

v.

I can't help but think, that this will end.

She is old, and in this garden set aside from the world and time, this garden that is everywhere and nowhere, she can hear the sighing of the wind, the moan and creak of the branches bending beneath it—they do not break.

She opens her arms to the coming breeze, looking skyward, knowing it will come soon.

And as it blows through her, she closes her eyes and realizes with pain he taught her everything.

He is dying. Not the gradual death of mortals, but a rapid, bloody death. His blood is spreading across her garden in slippery butterfly wings.

Never has there been blood in her garden, and she knows there never will be again.

He is dying. He is too young to die; even though he is a soldier, and she knows soldiers like him are as fleeting as butterflies, he is still too young. He has many more years to live, many more years to visit her with, or forget about her. To wander the world and write his pages in history.

He cannot die now.

She falls to her knees next to him and stares into his dark eyes, trying to see far into him.

"Why did you come?" she whispers.

"Do I need a reason? I've always loved it here. I feel at peace, at ease, and it is here I end, time and time again."

"You are dying."

His head turns toward her and he looks at her gently. "Yes."

He breathes. In, out, in, out. Raspy breaths that cause more blood to spread across her garden, onto her dress.

"Is this where you want to be? Surely, there are others who care for you more than I," and as always, there is the lingering question in her voice.

"No, this is where I want to be. Where I can be put to rest. My time is up." He breathes: in, out—skip—out, in. His voice is earnest. "I would've stayed here forever, if that's how things were meant, but I couldn't ignore what was going on. . . I had to leave, I had to." His hand clenches, and she sees him struggle with the pain.

"Yes, I know."

She reaches for his hand in the mirror of his own blood, and the clenched fingers loosen, and they entwine their fingers once again. He does not have the strength to lie on her shoulder, so she pulls herself so his head rests in her lap. Her other hand tangles in his hair.

He smiles, that smile she has come to love.

He whispers her name, the name she had never given him, would not give him.

She cries, and the earth stops to listen as she cradles his body.

vi.

I can hear your heartbeat and mine in the silence.

It is midnight in her world, and all is silent. The leaves do not hush, the sound of the brush painting across parchment has ceased; the cicadas do not draw their bows anymore, the unfurling of scrolls has disappeared. To her, time has stopped.

He is almost gone, the strings binding his body and heart are disappearing—rising, snapping, giving way—and soon there will be nothing she can do. The wound he had been given killed him slowly, but not slowly enough for her to save him—but he is not truly gone yet. . .

Does she want to do this?

She cannot take him to his people of medicine with their cold words and colder hands. His death is between the two of them. Her life is between the two of them.

She knows, then, that there never was any decision to this at all.

"This is it," she says as her face tilts to the clearing sky.

Her hands tighten in his hair and hand.

The sky splits, the tide recedes, to reveal the full moon.

She opens her eyes wide to the sky, filling them with the moon, ignoring the pain it brings and the tears it draws forth as the cold air steals her breath. . .

. . .and wipes away eternity, just as she was told she could.

She wonders if this is what it is like to die: to simply fade away. She can no longer see her hands smeared with his blood. She feels so light, but maybe it's the wind carrying her up.

She looks to the sky, a sea of blackness, so close she can hear its waves. She can read it well, like the feeling of raised text beneath her fingertips. But for once, this is a language she does not know.

But her decision has been made; there is only the present moment. She watches Aidan's still body, even though she can no longer feel him with her hands.

Only now, for there is no future for once. . .

She speaks to the void, the empty, mockingly blank paper, “. . . Can't I?”

7.

The darkness of the new moon. No one bothers to track this time of darkness—I don't. But I've always known, I always will: an irrevocable compass. I think of you. What can you see in this darkness, you who have the entire world?

The world is blue. That's the first thing he notices. But awareness quickly seeps through his arms and he flexes his fingers, turning his head to watch their slow movement. The grass is a shining gold, but when he shuts his eyes and opens them again, it is an ordinary green.

He moans as he sits up, the sound of the grass soft to his ears, his arm grasping his side, pulling the now too-large shirt away from his skin. He winces, hissing out a long breath between his teeth, as his skin separates from the bloody shirt. He turns his head the other way slowly and takes in the clearing: the trees, the grass, the flowers, the bench—flash of white, a sleeping face, she shivered and he rubbed her arms. It's her garden.

It's different, that's why he didn't recognize it right away.

Before, everything was like a dream. The colors blurring into one another and the shapes never standing still. She was always clear though. She was opaque and he could always see through her, and she only faded as the years went by. He finds it strange, then, that his last memory is one where she is just as real as he, her pale hands stained with his blood.

He brings himself to his knees and rolls on the balls of his feet to stand—at your feet soldier, he turns his thoughts away from things he'd rather not remember—and turns, seeing everything for the first time.

Inevitably, his gaze falls to the ivory archway with its intricate latticework. He can see the wind blowing through it. He can hear. . .

“Never have I met anyone like you, never in all my existence. I feel I never will again.”

He feels the movement of his body as it moves towards the open space; the sliding of sinew, the snap of bones—he starts to run now—the loud pounding of his blood, the smoothness he breathes with; he knows he is the boy he once was when he first wandered here.

“I will never die, I will go on forever and ever until the earth dies and the stars die.”

He smiles and knows everything will be alright.

“I know,” he says, “we all do.”

He passes beneath the archway that overflows with white blossoms and stops to catch his breath.

He'll stand beneath it many, many times.

8.

Everything returns; the sand runs between my fingers, the sea-salt lingers on my tongue. Just like this, the clay and dirt come together in dust to form the earth, the stardust melts into the sky; the two bleed into one another until there is no line. Just like this, you and I.

There is no beginning. There is no end. There is only and ever the present, and looking back or forward, all there is, is the same pattern repeating itself over and over again, a beautiful design of ink against cracked paper, dotted with variations.

There is nothing to do, and she is bored. She's seen this before and will again. She turns her head and peruses the garden with her too-old eyes and sits in the sunshine.

The garden is green and so vivid the colors hurt her eyes; she's not used to such vibrancy. She sits on the marble bench, luminescent even in the noontime shadow. She watches the butterfly darting in the column of dust-swirled light with disinterest, and when it flutters away, she stretches her arm, letting her hand rest in the empty space where the butterfly once was.

She hears the rustle of leaves, the strange sound that must be a flower blooming—she turns to look at the archway, not knowing why. It takes her a moment to realize that beneath the latticework of white flowers—this brings her a fierce joy she doesn't understand—is a boy.

There is something stirring, something she can't quite recall; the wind breathes down her neck, and she shivers. She looks down at her hands for a reason she doesn't know, and then at the boy.

"Do I know you?" she asks softly.

"Aidan," he says, "my name is Aidan."

He smiles, and there is something familiar there. She sees the knowing sadness in his eyes, and his smile, the wind, calls for a reply.

She rises from the bench, her dress twisting around her knees. She steps into the beam of sunlight, warm against her skin. She places her hands behind her back, and leans forward.

"I know you."

"Yes. You do."

There is something warm in his voice, and she feels it in her fingertips. She smiles, her lips parting to light her face. And suddenly, everything is right in the world.

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