

## Winter Alone

My toes are buried like gravels in the sands,  
My fingertips as hard as ivory.  
The shards of my tenderness as cold as echoes,  
The tears of my sanity as revered as relics.

I had lived on the island for nearly a year, and it seemed like it had been winter all along.

I had no complaint about that — I liked winter, in the same way as a furnace might enjoy its summer rest. The only expense was a dusty self-perception: walking down the street burying my face into the scarf, praying that no one could see me, better just vanishing into the thin air. So I stuck myself into my house and spent most of my time reading. Otherwise, I would observe a row of curtains across the street: uniformly dull khaki, bellied out in the wind at different rhythms, but never leaking out any spirit. I even started to behave like a psychopath in the story, walking around the coffee table in the living room, bending my fingers, mumbling to myself. I didn't worry too much about my mental state, though. Even if I tried to socialize, I would probably stumble on some queerer craziness in the crowd; but standing alone, seeing the sea of sapphire blue at a distance beyond these ashy cubic houses, at least I could imagine those cotton-white seagulls weren't crazy.

At dusk I would go for a stroll down the shore. It was only fifteen minutes from my house to the sea, passing by Monastery Street and Sea Angel Lane, along which every house had a bleached facade and a vibrantly colored gate, a sandwich shop whose neon sign shone day and night in a magenta tone, but seldom attracted any eaters, a pharmacy that closed early at five

p.m., a small chapel whose bell rang every day at six, and an organic food market — everything stood under a sky of such a grey color that had no depth, but somehow immense height.

Walking by that organic market and there was the sea, unraveling itself in a grandiose motion. The beach was neglected, where no one but seagulls and sandpipers hopped among black gravels and brown algae, squeaking out shrill cries. Yet sometimes, at sunset, I could see the frigid sea burn into a fervent color of purple and gold like a field of glazing irises, their petals softly caressing those weather-beaten concrete blocks offshore. Then I would remember the time he walked beside me, pointed out at a distant island, and jokingly remarked: “Look, Constantinople!”

In my pocket I felt the fragility of a piece of paper. Suddenly it became too real, we were back in my bedroom before he left, standing face to face in front of the window. I was talking about how I could never get my life together, and started shivering, yelling, crying hysterically, while outside in the darkness, heavy rain flung on the roof like handfuls of gravel, dropping five thousands feet from the sky with a suicidal force. When he came forth and clasped me into his chest, I reached desperately to press my face against his neck and collarbone, standing on tiptoe, breathing like a fish on the deck. His skin was warm, without any scent, a thin layer of flesh, composed of billions of unnamed alien cells, petrified in the human frame. I was scared, so scared I kept on murmuring in broken voice through tears, “...What if I’m crazy? But I don’t want...I don’t want to be crazy...”

It was all dark outside. I could see our reflection clearly on the window, half of my face above his shoulder, looking like a drowned corpse, and he was a solid, white and blank.

That piece of paper had his number on it. He had told me to call him in springtime, a so-called future as close to me as Constantinople.

So every day after dinner I walked to the shore, gazing at those familiar concrete blocks, at the waves heaving their silvery cloak. Sometimes in a clear day I could see a white ship, slowly sailing toward that island of Constantinople, but never reaching its shore. Later in the evening, the island would be lit in a warm amber color — not a single light or two, but thousands of lights, like a waterfall of stars, or ceaseless teardrops of a giant. Then on my way back home, walking by that silent organic market, I vaguely realized that I hadn't vanished, and didn't deserve to vanish. The rhythm of the waves, together with all its momentum underneath, had immersed me. My senses, my blood, my organs, all were propelled into a wavy motion toward the deepest place in my head.

One night I had a dream. I used to hang lots of dried flowers on my wall, carefully designing each of them in position. It was always raining those days, and I became quite upset living alone. One day I suddenly saw more flowers on the wall, breaking the arrangement. I was paranoid, and started to cry and yell at the air surrounding me, yet nothing could quench my anger — at the second it reached its climax, all the flowers on the wall disappeared.

I was somehow convinced that it was his spirit in the room, so I turned on all the lights and opened up a yellow umbrella, telling myself that he was right beneath it even though I couldn't see him. So I lit up the room to a blazing brightness, and kept talking to the invisible ghost under the umbrella, apologizing, telling him I really liked his flowers, asking him please not to take them away.

When I woke up it was nine in the morning, really bright outside, the sky being a lighter color than the sea — I'd forgotten to close the curtain at night. I faintly recalled that he told me

there was nothing people couldn't adapt to. Maybe he was right — when eating alone, reading alone, writing alone, walking alone, and sleeping alone had become my normal, I could hardly imagine a better condition. I was so used to the rhythm of waves that it resided in my body, and when I breathed I could smell the salty water.

Yet staring at the empty wall in sunlight, I still missed those flowers.

As I walked by that desolate pharmacy I called his number, scratching my phone case, feeling awkward. The ringtone repeated several times, and when I reached the chapel I was prepared to hear a mechanical, unperturbed voice telling me I couldn't reach him, but then he answered.

I stood on the street, holding my phone in a sudden thirst. For a while I couldn't think of anything but to hang up. Then he spoke first. "I just finished the illustration project for a literary magazine." he stopped a bit, "They want watercolor instead of gouache, but I mixed them both together."

I didn't say anything. There was a tiny unnamable, untamable impulse poking my body. I could sense the presence of another human. He continued on: "They are publishing some poems by a Turkish-born writer — I can send you a copy; you'll like it."

So I asked him what they were about, and he told me that they were a contemporary recreation of some Old English elegies; the poet studied Old English Literature and Translation in college. Then he asked me if I remembered the time we were learning poems like "Wulf and Eadwacer" and "Wife's Lament" years ago. I smiled a bit.

We spent some time talking about the magazine he was working for and his life away from here. He said his drawing had lagged behind since he left, and he missed the apples we

bought in that organic market next to the beach.

I stopped by the market and walked in, the first time in a long time, and asked him if he'd eaten his candies on schedule. During the worst days of his Depression, he used to put a little slide top tin container in his pocket and fill it with colorful candies. But that day he said: "Haven't thought of things that need candies these days."

I bought a bag of apples, put it in a shopping cart, and pushed the cart outside the market straight off to the beach, for the only girl at the checkout counter was busy on her phone and didn't care what I did — we had done this once before, pushing our stolen cart all the way along the shore, and at some time I jumped in and rode in it, laughing hard.

From my point on the beach, I can see an intangible layer of milky-white mist, hovering over the Persian blue sea at a distance, slowly traveling forward, bringing with it the most redolent pollens from all over the world.

He used to say that it is a shame to feel lonely in springtime.