



**Tangerine and
summer nights**

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a lyrical novelette by Harlequin

*Dedicated to
The fiery axe on the field,
The paw shaping defiant warmth,
The oddest sweetness that makes the boy,
The cloud high above, always there, and
The vibrant, lavender light by my side*

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Burial Night

A warm-cold estival breeze flooded Tangerine's skin, decorating the pale, soft surface with hundreds of bumps. Only few faint gusts soared through the moonlit garden, yet they were sufficient to make Tangerine feel their coldness.

I do wonder where the trails of these winds lead. They touch me, and I shiver – yet they aren't me, they aren't close to me. They merely grow sickness.

With an exhale quieter than what would make a sigh, Tangerine directed their gaze further up. Not to the moon or the stars, but to the crowns of the trees. The leaves had tired of their daily dances by now, and only swam through the tranquillity of the nocturnal air.

»Should we bury it?«, Robin whispered from the side. His left hand, as always, found its way onto Tangerine's shoulder. »It's about time we let the root system take it into its care.« Tangerine looked down upon the fabric in their hands, refusing to reminisce about the licentious paths it had been pulled through. Without hesitation, they nodded, and handed the boy the tattered cloth which the skirt had already been reduced to. »Robin...«, Tangerine sighed as soon as the skirt had left their

hands. It was a sigh with great strain. »Do you think there will ever be a moment... when we will find rest? When we will stop crawling?«

Robin shook his head. »I cannot speak for you, but that is a place I am not interested in looking for.« He took a few steps forward and gently placed the skirt into the shallow hole in front of them. For a moment, all that Tangerine was capable of viewing was the short yet thick brown hair on the back of Robin's head. There was something about how he carried himself through the evening, and the evening only – and this near-elegance was already faltering now that both of them had long entered night-time.

As they watched Robin continue the burial, Tangerine fumbled with the hem of their oversized tank top. A quiet night, all sounds but the winds removed. Such solitude could only ever be achieved with hymn.

The stars I care not for. There is no more thrilling light than that which we are already so deeply drowning in. And stray lights I will continue to follow.

A forceful gust caused Tangerine's fluffy hair to take momentary flight, ripping the youth out of their undesired nostalgia. Their patchy dress accompanied

the strands of hair and the thoughts that had just been blown away for a few seconds. »I think this should be plenty«, Robin exclaimed. His hands were full of dirt by now. He stepped back, looking at the result: a small pile of dirt that had been flattened as much as its dry self allowed. »We were never going to win a beauty contest with this, and I doubt hy'd have wanted it to be perfect.« Tangerine silently agreed with Robin's assessment and removed a small twig from the not-actually-a-grave grave. Perfection was unnecessary, insulting even – but that didn't rule out orderliness. »I suppose–«, they began, pausing to clear their throat, »–we've completed what we've come here for. I need no further nights.« With a little nudge against their hat to put it back into position atop their hair, Tangerine sent a quaint nod flying towards the earthly unevenness Robin had created and turned around. »I suppose a 'farewell' would only mock hys moving on.«

Robin made his way out of the garden.

Riparian

There was this one time when Nathan was truly in the depths of his own inescapable forest. His voice was distorted when I approached him and asked him about where he had been. »Nowhere. Just here.«

Quaint hums vaguely following the melody of *Lacrimosa* echoed through the call. The origins were still uncertain, and Nathan's unsettling stability grew more and more cataclysmic. »I am coming for you, Nathan.« An audible gulp of silence, and then the humming again. The sun was still setting, and the sweltering heat lingered around above the grey planes of the city.

I took the bus, the violent shaking of the vehicle keeping me even further on edge. Few older people were scattered across the seats, some of them asleep. I looked at my phone.

Tangerine: Stay where you are.

Nathan: I cannot stay where I am not.

Tangerine: Just don't go anywhere.

Did I hear trains in the call? Are there train tracks near you?

Nathan: Maybe.

Tangerine: Don't do anything stupid.
Nathan: I won't.
I mean, this is stupid enough.
But you know that already.
Tangerine: Yeah, I know.
Do you have a poem for me?
Nathan: one sec

The bus came to an uncharacteristically soft halt. The air outside the box on wheels had finally calmed down, yet the tension underlying Nathan distinctly remained within the atmosphere. My feet carried me across the deserted streets and pavements; trampling tar, grass, dirt, daisies. The train station was only a few more blocks away. A buzz in my pocket pulled me out of my trance.

Nathan: *The current rushes and pulls the rocks
It loves the edges; it devours the colour
Move and you may reconcile
Trip and you may liquify*
Tangerine: Thanks. This is good.
Nathan: It's on the nose. Very much so.
Condescendingly so.
Tangerine: It mocks itself, does it not?

No reply. The rustling of antiquated trains announced a dismissible crowd of diversion. Nathan's light weakened. My body rushed along the side of the tracks, pausing only for soft whistling sounds that could be mistaken for pained breath.

Tangerine looked at their hand, red, warm, buzzing. The palm was devoid of its usual softness, the new numbness replacing it only adding a coarse texture. His face, dejected, vibrated still. His eyes sought no purpose, no help. He had found peace with the crumbling of his self, but how did he dare find peace?

With another burst of tears repressed, Tangerine gathered the force anew; one more to rob him of his calm, one more to make him feel what he had to feel. A red hand, barren, leaving without any spoils. A mere force of bone against flesh, giving it all and taking none.

Tangerine swept the crumbled piece of paper from his hand and examined the words that had been so softly given life to weeks before. A faintly brushed "T" decorated the corner, the final was the primary. Their red eyes soared across the lines.

*Humid stalemates before arrival
A still delivered sight into mirrors
The gusts which pull away from gentiana
And leave a cruel venomous fortnight*

*A sickness which crashes down onto
All waving foam seeking to build;
Not impurely linger and roam and none
Else to be had; Else to be done*

»Nathan...«, I whispered when I finally saw his feet dancing atop the dumpster near the tracks. His steps were clumsier than ever, his body violently thrashing about rather than attempting balance. »Tange. You've found me.« He smiled without smiling.

»Were you here the entire day or did you arrive later?« The boy let his behind fall into the mess of the container with unparalleled joy. »Later. Spent most of the day in the bushes of the backyard.« He had found a rock inside the otherwise artificial sea and fiddled around with it. His chin was full of bruises, and his freckles were familiarly much covered in dirt, only diluted by the oiliness of his eyebags. He continued his search in the container, interrupting it only to rip up an old, discarded poster. I could only make out the letters "im", yet Nathan's contempt for the piece of paper was

unmistakable. His mind was blank, or at least not focused on anything but the shrouded shrubs clouding his breakdown. As he finally pushed himself out of the unmotherly lake, Nathan handed me a neatly written note.

»Another poem?«

Nathan nodded.

»My poem. I wrote it while waiting for no one to find me.«

*My idol in distress, the goddess of failure and insufficiency
I'm the broken pencil who stabs your veins*

- T

»Let's go to my place, Nathan.« He nodded, before wiping the tears out of my eyes. Twins in shredded strings fusing into sustained riverbeds of metal tracks. I paid for a taxi, and we both found softness in embraces. He fell asleep on my shoulder, like a little boy after a trip through paved hell.

Bleeding Into One Another

One throw. One miss. Nathan chuckled briefly before taking hys straw back. Hys long eyelashes seemed to flicker and wave through the stagnant air of the room every time hys body resorted to this near-automatic response to anything. Hy returned to his seat, and everyone's eyes shifted over to Tangerine.

One throw. One miss. None of the people present were any skilled at what they were attempting, but exactly that was part of the fun.

One throw. One miss. Robin picked up his straw, visibly disappointed that his seventeenth endeavour to land the straw in the bottle was a failure, too. His brown hair was a bit greasy; Tangerine assumed that after work he had come over right away, no break at home at all. And yet at the same time, the boy refused to take the appearance of a maggot crawling out of an overheated crushing system after hours of useless struggles, but remained as free as the seed of a dandelion instead.

One throw. One miss. Talon grunted as he got up to retrieve his straw. His day of non-work had left far more visible marks on the also greasy boy, as his forehead struggled to achieve any sense of dryness. Tangerine pulled their dress down, before preparing themselves for the next throw. Their hair was fresh, but it would not

remain so for long. Even with the sun setting, this month kept its relentlessness thriving with careless force.

One throw. One miss. Nathan took his straw and sat back down, his eyes by now drifting away from the centre of the room.

»They took down the acorn at the old playground«, Robin sighed. He was by now hunched back in the seat, his head resting on the top of the chair's backrest. The sudden announcement rang through the room despite its quiet nature, and none of the four showed any intent to reply. Tangerine shook their head. The importance of this acorn was unknown to them, especially considering how little time Robin had spent underneath or around it in the past years. Talon scratched his stomach under his shirt, seemingly as unshaken by the news as Tangerine themselves. Only Nathan's eyes lost an iota of shine. »I found something in the branches they left on the ground«, Robin added after what felt like eternity but what cannot have been longer than a few seconds.

One throw. One hit. No one was looking, and Tangerine could feel it. The straw neatly twirled around the bottle neck and quickly fell into rest. The bottle stood unshaken; much unlike the lost sheep in the pen who

had never again thought of their past jailbreaks into the future. Nathan gulped; Talon chuckled innocently.

The pointy tip was still a bit wet. An impulsive urge to lick the blade was quickly suppressed, and Tangerine washed the tip in the sink. No, this would not be the way they'd connect with him. A ghost of what once promised to be more than ruins; yet the debris would never serve as the path to fusion. Nathan was still whimpering, covered by Tangerine's blanket. They did not know what he wanted. But they had to do something at some point.

He looked so tired. His eyes were dry, but also hollower than ever. Plentiful thorns that kept away, only allowing the sucking, draining pain to pull him apart from the inside.

»Do you want some ice cream?«

No response.

»...I am not going to leave you, Nathan.«

A trivial nod.

»Okay.«

»Mhm.«

The boy's knees twitched a bit. They were still red and sore, dry, and wet. Blood turned out to be pretty bad at

moisturizing skin. Tangerine offered Nathan a glass of water. Hy only took a sip, but it was better than no sip at all. The light brown shoulder-long hair rested so serenely on top of hys shoulders that Tangerine was tempted to forget the flaming embers they stood on. Both wanted to connect. Both had failed. Both hadn't cried. Hadn't bled.

2:38 AM. Nathan was asleep, and Tangerine watched hym carefully. Hys breaths were soft, weak, regular, twitchy, cold, captivating, obscene, fractured. Hy was fractured. Tangerine picked up the glass and brought it into the kitchen. The knife in the sink glowed without its usual spite. It too had left its shine behind. A broken groan from their room drew them back.

*I gaze upon the stars one night, the darkness has fallen
My night is my light, new springs are calling
A flowering drought in sight, the verdant islands bloom
I proclaim our grim blight, before you see our doom
For damned we remain within the vines of feeling*

Nathan had closed hys eyes and turned away. Robin's sweet smiles could not find the lost boy's conflict. He stashed it back into his pocket. »The acorn is gone, but its fruits remain«, Nathan whispered audibly enough for

everyone to hear. Robin smiled sympathetically and placed his hand on his shoulder. Talon grinned at the sight, pulling Tangerine into an embrace of his own. His soft arms reached out for the other two, and flickering lights daring to extinguish in ashes grew anew once more.

»Whose straw is this?«, Talon asked with surprise as he laid his eyes onto the success which he proclaimed he himself would achieve in a matter of five attempts. »Tange's«, Nathan replied with a soft tone that only differed from the previous one in its confidence. Tangerine looked at their straw. The pointy tip was still a bit wet.

»How about we go get some ice cream?«, Talon cheered, almost already leading the way out of the room. Robin nodded eagerly, and the silent twin alliums followed suit in their collective swim. Nathan reluctantly slipped his fingers into Tangerine's and they all left the house.

Residual sunshine past the golden ball's departure guided the friends across the empty, dry streets, and to the destination they had chosen. Tangerine felt a tad dizzy, and it would not be long before the grasping venom would reach their somnolent silvan secrets, swiftly robbing undisturbed aspirations.

»Vanilla, please.«

The butterfly dared not spread its wings, for it could never take flight; for it could never view its own fragrance.

»Maxi Chocolate Cup for me, please!«

The ivy would spread eternally, singed only by its own voracity, humbled never; an endless scramble for quality within the core's faltering.

»For me just lemon, please.«

The Prince will always roam and seldom halt. There was no binding spell, no curse of the inevitable pyre; he'd forever leave a trail in sombre skies, never filled.

Hys voice wandered through the hallways shrouded in misty darkness. Tangerine cowered under the table. The rain outside thundered onto the shallow roof.

»Tange. Breathe with me.«

The downpour drowned out hys voice more and more, and Tangerine fought for oxygen.

»Tange. I know. But stay on it.«

Hys voice faded into cosmic synths engulfing the dim lights of the room. Tangerine could not see him and could barely even feel hys presence anymore. Bolts of pain rushed to their chest, and grey memories raced to

reach their mind against their will. 2600 whispers violently kissed their soul, tearing the gentle entrance.



Futile efforts to smear the familiar scented essence into growing pains of sore bloodshot eyes failed within seconds. Tangerine started to feel dizzier and more unstable. How long had they been under that table? When did the thundering bangs of the Trembling begin? When had they left?

»Tangerine. Look at me.«

They looked up and found their reflection in Nathan's eyes. Not really, but they seemed clear and pure enough for it.

»I am going to get you some water now. Do you want to come to the bathroom with me?«

Tangerine nodded and let themselves get dragged up by their companion. The relationship of a snail and a frog, both grasping for water and salt, drowning and dehydrating. Hy was afraid, Tangerine could tell. But not of them, but for them. They failed to see the fear within themselves, and hy seemed to have taken it upon himself to take care of that matter.

Shards of the Fruit

Sunshine filled the room. 24°C. A blessing that would not remain in its modesty for long. 8:52 AM. A griping, numbing poison that would unleash its blood-clotting ignorance in due course, taking delight in its equalization. Tangerine put down the empty glass.

Nobody could ever choose their link in the chains binding the flowerbed. They had known for a long time and could tell hy had as well. Hys quiet sobs echoed through the dark.

»I don't think we should be doing this.« Talon's sighs grew. He had shaken all of Tangerine's feelings and now the blend of this moment's weight infected every hydrophilic crack in their soul.

It wasn't me now, was it?

This Trembling is not mine.

»Please, Talon. Let me be. This is not what I asked for.«
That is what hy'd never said. Hy never would have.

»Fungicides. Bromine chloride. You know.« Talon's voice did not falter. »I know you don't care. Neither do I. You do want to know what happened to your notebook,

right? I have it on me if you want it back already.«
Hy never said yes. Hy never said no. Hy said nothing.
But hy did not want to know.

»You are aware already, aren't you? The cracks inside our
tales across summer.«

Hy would nod. There was no reasonable denial. Not even
irrational denial. Hy giggled softly, hys sweat
beflowering familiar smiles and excuses.

Robin had been a very straightforward boy since his
early childhood. He had never been one to take chances,
and he wouldn't have wanted to make it a habit later into
his life either. He would not remain long in places that
didn't call for his desire or need; lingering was only
reserved for those who were present, those who he
wanted to linger around with. He was restless, and he
had always been restless, but not once would he doubt
his ways, that was for sure, an unshaken foundation.

»Will it be more stable this way?«, Robin asked.

»We'll have to see. I can still spot some cracks. And this
looks a fair bit wobbly.«

»Wobbly it is as wobbly we are. Why even sandcastles all
of a sudden?«

»You know why. I've always wanted to build them with

you. You'd always been busy looking for rocks. When would be a better time to catch up with my oh so desperate dreams than after dark?»

»And... while drunk.«

»Tipsy. All part of the fun, believe me. Although, your rocks back then *were* quite cool.«

»And you were very obvious about it, Tange. You could never stop staring at my collections.«

»Sure, sure. So easy to say in hindsight, Mr. Omniscient.» They chuckled and pressed another batch of wet sand against the fractured wall of the sandcastle. Fractured no more. Simple, easy, all oopsies gone.

Sunshine left the beach. 24°C. A disintegrating curse. 10:13 PM. An indulgence they had every reason to afford. And Robin was there along with them, joining a ride through the buttercup winds in soggy dizziness. He had not indulged; his only sin would prove to be his leniency. Moving his fingers close to the top of the sandcastle, Robin carefully placed a single seashell in the centre of the main tower. It made for a grand display in rosy, watered eyes, for a childish one in guiltily nostalgic pleasure. Wind attempted to rob the structure of its latest addition, but without avail.

»Are you not enough?«, Tange whispered.

Robin tilted his head, a tad puzzled by the sudden

question without context.

»You and I here, hands in the sand. Why any more than this? It's perfect.«

Robin refused to decipher their rambling's underlying reasoning and resorted to the reassurance he knew they would never have in excess.

»It is. Hands, sand, you, me... and cool rocks.«

Tangerine shook their head.

»Not like this, Robin. No music from your pleas.«

Robin sighed. There was no breaking down of their wall of mystery.

»Is there something you want, Robin?«

Tangerine looked down into the wet sand. This time, he understood, and shook his head.

»It's better this way for you and for me, Tange. Come on, let's get into some dry clothes.« He offered an insecure, almost wistful smile, and Tangerine accepted.

»Hold on. I oughta get this pigeon out of the way.«

Nathan shooed the ave away with a weak hissing noise. Flapping wings distanced themselves from hym and hy returned to hys phone call.

»I'm back.«

»Pigeon? What's up with that?«

»He wants me to get rid of the birds. He thinks of them

as bad omens.«

Tangerine snorted. Nathan's father was not the person they imagined to be superstitious like that.

»I kind of do, too. I mean, not really. I know there's nothing... *there* about them. I just don't feel at ease around them.«

»Any birds? Or just pigeons?« Tangerine suppressed further snorts and tried their best to sound inquisitive and attentive instead.

»Mostly pigeons. I also feel bad for them, though. They didn't do anything wrong for me to feel this way.« Hy sighed. »It's not like I mistreat them.«

Static noise gave their call a retro flavour. Tangerine would have found it quite charming at any other point in time, and they could tell that Nathan was not enjoying the interference either.

»You don't have to pretend it's not silly.« Hy declared that not with disappointment or even the intent of freeing Tangerine from acting, but much more so in a defeated, self-ironic way. Like a worm wanting to be pecked by the pigeons it called.

»It is silly. And I am calling you on a Wednesday morning while brushing my teeth on the balcony. Don't think you can out-silly me, dork.« Tangerine gave in to their senseless impulse to spit the brewed potion of

saliva and toothpaste down from the balcony, unexpectedly accurately hitting the trash can in the backyard. If only the lid had been open.

»I suppose. But we know that your silliness is the fascinating one. Mine's the boring one.«

»...is what you are saying while scaring away random birds from your doorstep despite the bag of seeds you store right there.«

»We call the birds as much as we deflect them.«

Hys tone returned to its prior state.

»You remind me of the time Nathan was tipsy.«

»Hey, I'm not rambling that much, am I?«

»No. I mean the thing with his... determination he got after those three drinks. The 3993 thing.«

Tangerine chuckled with a red face. The heat of the alcohol was surprisingly present, much more so than they would have ever imagined after the little amount they had. *Every morning has different flowers*, they thought.

»Thee make three in nine;

A threesome in trilogy!«, Tangerine recited.

»Yes. Poor guy had no idea what hys words did to poor Talon.« A sparkle shot from Tangerine's eyes as they scoffed. Wretched pigeon. Their sight blurred a bit. What was in there? It was probably the summer heat

exacerbating the effects.

»That's nothing I can reach with mere sandcastles«, they added in playful resignation.

They returned to the playground. Talon was still placed in the wide bowl-like swing and was focused on his phone. Nathan was still not here.

»Do you think hy's probably held up by Marianne again?« Talon looked up at the two standing in front of him again suddenly. »Dunno. That girl has got to be the neediest, so I guess hy might be.«

»I think with two years old she's allowed to be a needy girl«, Robin sighed and sat down in the playground sand. »It's nice to see hym so invigorated ever since she's been there.« Silent nods and an orange smile.

Not many clouds had passed by the tall office building – 'The Bherkin', as Talon called it – when Nathan finally showed up. »A skirt?«

Hy nodded eagerly. Nervously. Brimming with butterflies. »A skirt...«, Tangerine whispered, their sight less blurry by now but much more hyperfocused on the garment now. »It suits you«, Robin added with a sweet grin. Hy walked over to the trio and sat down on one of the smoothened rocks.

*It is but with a tinge of lavender that I gaze upon butterflies
For even with the brittle pride inside they inevitably give rise
To mesmerizing horizons beyond their nocturnal desires;
To strange sparks distant from modest campfires*

»You've already been drinking?« Nathan's face was tainted by the casual worry he so easily and blatantly carried with himself everywhere he went. »Not much. My body's not being too happy about it, though.« They chuckled, luckily convincingly enough for Nathan to return a relieved smile.

The sun eventually dove into the far end of the city, engulfing the tightly knit web of infrastructure into magenta flames. A breeze from the river passed by, finally lending the youths a break from the sweat on their foreheads. Every estival endeavour would evermore remain entranced in crackling shine. Tangerine's shorts clung to their body, as did their oversized t-shirt. It was, however, never to rival the tanktop embracing Talon or the button-up shirt binding Robin.

»I want more«, Tangerine muttered to themselves, audible for everyone present. Robin shook his head in confusion, Nathan appeared to return to his worries. Tangerine jolted up with a burst of evening vim and

waved temporary goodbye, leaving for the grocery store around the corner.

»So, umm, did you have like, sex?«

»...what?«

»You've heard me.«

»Yes. I did hear you. And no. Why would you even-«

»A hunch. Shivers.«

»Are you sure you're not just shivering because of the snow you are literally sitting in?«

»Who knows. I am just evaluating.«

»Aurora, please.«

»I'll do this the way I have to do it. If you want my help, that's how it's gonna be.«

»...I think I can endure that much. I guess.«

»Refusing to answer is an option, just so you know. My answer is gonna be based on what you *do* answer.«

»Okay.« Acceptance. Aurora tilted its head.

»I think there's more to it, Tan. Not to you two, but to the situation.«

»Like what?«

»Beats me. I'm no fortune teller. It's just a bit more than a hunch for me. And I have the feeling you are involved a lot more than you know.«

»Ominous.«

»Indeed.« Aurora straightened its head again and took a brief pull.

»Any more questions?« Tangerine began feeling faintly impatient.

»No. That was my answer already. Sorry, it's not much.«

»That's alright.«

»I've gotta go to work in a few. See you around?«

»If you'll find a spot in your schedule during which you can be my friend, sure«, Tangerine teased.

»Yeah, yeah. I'll see where I can fit you in.«

Tangerine returned with several packs of snacks and two cans of some viscerally sweet alcohol. Robin cringed at the mere sight of the fruity neon colours on the cans. After a tiny yawn to celebrate their return, Tangerine gave one of the cans to Talon who wouldn't have been able to hide his excitement over the beverage even if he had tried. They opened their cans and took quick care of the liquid inside. Tangerine could immediately feel the rush of sugar hit their head, followed by the aftertaste of the little alcohol the drink had to offer. They sprawled out on the bench between Nathan and Talon. With their head resting against Nathan's legs, they could only see hym upside down, a sight the tipsier Tangerine had to

snicker about. Nathan joined in, albeit with a bit more reluctance and attempted restraint.

Good Night

Nathan picked up the watering can with the pink flowers and poured some water onto the dried soil of the cornflowers. Their blue gazes sparkled with the rainbow soaring through the water drops.

»Thank you so much for watching out for my little sister«, Aurora whispered into his ear. »She really likes your flowers. And you.« Nathan blushed and nodded contently. »She does indeed. Yesterday I had to lure her away from the rhododendron just to get her to eat lunch. It was quite a predicament.« Aurora chuckled at the thought. It brushed some of its long, wavy hair out of its face. »Here's your reward. I'll take her home now.«

Aurora held its arm out to Marianne after pulling its bag over its shoulder and left, throwing one thankful smile back before closing the door.

This lies far before the Trembling.

Whose petals had been blown by now would not bring forth such raw desire for responsibility. His vernal bloom attracted the wasps and leeches.

This, again, is not my Trembling.

»Tange? Where did you come from?«

»I was in the area. And I just bought a new set of watercolours. So, if you're curious to test them out...«

Nathan's face lit up. No time to waste. »I'll get the sketchbook.«

Tangerine treaded across the muddy field of former sweetness with haste. There was no need to savour the visceral scene or even revel in the tragic embarrassment of it. Grey clouds adorned the sky, and only few cracks permitted sunlight to hit the roof. Tangerine admired the symmetry of the fence surrounding the roof, all in bold, ignorant metal. They could feel the needle in their arm sting a bit as they moved closer to the fence. Not a single person populated the yard despite the hundreds of souls wandering through this hall of convalescence.

»I see you haven't changed, still.«

»I've come to visit.«

»You've come to feel better.«

»I brought you some flowers.«

»You fulfilled their bland demands.«

»What's your deal, Tange?«

»You call me friend when all I am is spite.«

He sighed. Tangerine sighed, too. Their hair would have blown all over the place in the windy mess of this Saturday, had it not been tied together and put up so neatly. He would never change, and he proved it

brilliantly. Like a knife running through the heart, precisely, unwaveringly, always deadly in the right spot – like a rat eternally running into the trap.

He sat down next to Tangerine. They knew nothing would change that. A colder breeze caught them off-guard, and they started shivering.

»Nice day«, he muttered.

»Yes.« Tangerine nodded and could feel the goosebumps on their arms.

»You cheated back then, didn't you?«

»I knew the undealt cards, yes.«

»I knew it.«

»Only a petty parasite hunting for filthy scraps of pride like you would view this as a victory.«

He raised his eyebrow.

»You're still on about that?«

»Yes, I am. You aren't, I know that much, although you have no reason not to be. If I could, I would end this day on the happy note of catapulting your body over this fence.«

»Harsh.«

»Deserved.«

Tangerine kicked against his knee. He didn't flinch, and they suspected he barely even felt the lifeless attempt at frustrated violence. They would not want to call it

vengeful violence, as they knew their motives to be even more selfish than that.

The roof was abandoned except for the two uneven souls. It was lunchtime, and despite the atrocities committed in this hospital's kitchen, barely anyone would have wanted to miss it. Rattle snakes and their flies symbiotically succumbing to each other's venom.

»When are you getting out of here?«

»Not sure. Don't wanna know.«

»...you wanna stay here?«

»Cowardly, I know. But yeah.«

»I guess. Hy would also...«

»Don't- just don't.« Their face darkened in an instant.

»Okay.«

»You have no right to. You're a disgrace.«

»Harsh.«

»I will not hold back when it comes to your filthy face. You've tainted the entire world that night.«

Tangerine slapped his face. Their hand was even weaker than their leg, still bound by the needle. The impact of physical realms superseded that of emotion. Talon didn't react. How should he have reacted? He knew of the muddy swan; he would never forget it. He knew of the

colder nights ahead. Tangerine was uncertain. They quietly packed their things and got up.

Who needs the tiny grain of sand in the traitorous sea of time?

Pre-Morning.

I blankly stared out the window into the greasy, narrow streets breaking through concrete walls. The cold clouds in grey winds kissed a world goodbye as skies announced the night so late would soon turn early morning. Fraudulent. The façade of a life, the mask of success, the pretty doll of integrity. Quixotic. Truly in disarray, the smiles of lies.

My stomach was still in despair, as foul fish spread its rot from within. There was no moment of rest; it relentlessly invaded safely from within the colon.

»Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...«

The thorns passed, ultimately.

Morning.

76 minutes of tranquillity would only ever be equivalent to the infamous phrase sung so sweetly in the mass of protesting screams. I dragged myself out of bed and made the attempt of brushing my hair. The tips were fractured, split; a complete mess in reflection. The emphasizing strokes and keys strung together with

forceful, relentless, if not also poignant stabs. A herd, until a lonesome trail would drift off far into more distant abysses yonder. There was a knock on the door, and I hurried over.

»How was Marianne today?«

»A handful, but adorable as always. She really finds sparkles in everything.« Hy chuckled with genuine fondness in his voice.

»What colour is this?«

»...funnily enough, I'd call that colour tangerine.«

»Nathan.«

»Whaaat? It's true.«

»I know you are specific with colours but isn't that a bit *too* specific for the sake of making a pun?«

Hy giggled. They knew it.

»You know, she is really interested in you too, Tange.« This time, his voice was joined by a touch of unease.

»She said she likes your hair. And she admires your... more unorthodox approaches.«

»Stop beating around the bush. I know you well enough.«

»Would you do watercolours with her next time? If you have the time... it would make her day.«

»I don't know...«

»I know, and you really don't need to. No pressure. I just wanted to... ask at least, you know?«

They shook their head.

»I don't know.«

»...would it maybe be a way to engage with that mess?«

»No. It would likely be the same as always. Like that one knot in your hair that is so tight and solid and out of reach that you don't even know how to begin ridding yourself of it. Eternally there.«

»Not if you start.«

»Where it's at, only cutting will be a solution.«

Nathan sighed. Hy knew in which direction this would go. »It's alright. As I said, no obligation.«

You would comprehend after the Trembling of your own. Two nights after the dahlia's bloom, one night after the buttercup's dehydration.

»Tange«, Robin whispered.

The youth raised their head and met his eyes.

»Are you really alright?«

They nodded with the genuine reassurance he seemed to have hoped for.

It was still not completely dark at the playground. More clouds had passed the Bherkin. No stars yet, just the mist of estival evenings. Nathan twitched more and

more frequently. But Tangerine didn't mind. They still felt comfortable with their head on his lap.

»Talon, should we go to your place?«

He perked up from his phone and nodded casually.

»Sure. My parents won't be home until the end of the week anyway.« With a little effort he threw the weight of his body out of the bowl swing. Tangerine asked Nathan to carry them, but the boy had to decline. Talon offered his services, but Tangerine was not interested.

The night was fresh, but off. Even through the alcohol scent, Tangerine could sense and smell an unsettling thunderstorm... dangerously close. The huge purple hand gently holding the cube of the church. They could hear the beacon bidding farewell.

Tangerine tightly held onto Nathan's hand. As always, he was making sure that everyone was safe. His best friend made it easy for him to worry. Talon marched on ahead, loudly announcing his stories, his jovial tales, and his crushing carelessness. Robin, the angel, occupying the liminal. A web cast from distance which felt impassable yet non-existent. Robin sighed as though he had sensed the uncanny, too. His eyes told a tale of not too dissimilar worry.

»We should hurry.«

»No need to. We have all night.«

»I suppose.«

»No need to ruin the flow of our fun.«

Both of them felt each other's tension. A tension characterized by selfish longing for indulgence, and a tension consisting of premonition.

In deeper veins the pretentious commit a greater crime.

The four friends arrived at Talon's house.

*Integrity surely retains the poisoned, fractured sin,
Even within the knowledge of other's deceitful grin.*

4 AM

It was a cold, cruel Saturday night. Tangerine, Robin, Talon, and Nathan had planned to meet up at Nathan's house to celebrate his 17th birthday. Tangerine had sensed the boy's excitement radiating from him all week. He seemed to intend for this day to be most special. Just the day before he had shown even less restraint than usual while rambling about his poetry and flowers.

The path is taken, the paved ways follow through... alone.

As Tangerine approached the door, they could already feel the warmth emanating from inside the house. A welcoming warmth, and yet still as off as weeks before, when they had walked from the playground to Talon's house. Nathan opened the door and smiled at them excitedly, dressed in his favourite skirt.

Robin sat in the sought-after armchair seat and enjoyed what appeared to be a self-made cocktail. By the looks of the swirly green-turquoise mess inside the glass, it must have been one of Talon's creations.

»And now we're all here«, Nathan cheered.

»Can I get you something, Tange?«

The melody in his tone whenever he spoke to Tangerine was much less subtle this evening, but they didn't mind.

»Just some coke for now. I'll wait a bit with the alcohol if I'll have any at all.«

Nathan nodded and quickly disappeared into the kitchen. Tangerine sat down next to Talon, who was occupying the centre of the couch.

»Well, Tange, looks like this birthday is getting our birthday boy very excited«, he chuckled.

»Hy **is** very quick to be excited, after all.«

»Especially when it comes to us«, Robin added.

»Still, I feel like something is up, Talon.«

He shrugged with an uninterpretable humming noise.

»If there is something, we'll probably see.«

Nathan returned with a bottle of coke and a glass that could hold a lot more liquid than Tangerine intended to drink for now. Hy sat down next to Talon after handing the two things over to his friend. Vicious winds howled outside, granting a surprisingly stormy and barren flavour to the summer night.

Shaking earth and screaming souls; crying flowers blown

Apart in invading desire

Incision; 'tis thrashing over gifting

»Two hours and fourteen minutes until your birthday. Not all that long anymore, eh?« Robin grinned. Whatever was in Talon's cocktail recipe was having

major effects on the thin boy. Talon himself had yet to touch his own drink.

»Yes. There were times when  «, hy whispered in response, » .«

Windy songs outside the comfy house increased their volume, bemoaning bards of the past.

*The stammering voices soar beneath the extinguished fire;
Trembling inner and outer, soon to be shifting.*

»Any plans for your 18th birthday?«

Nathan chuckled and shook hys head. »Talon, it's just almost my 17th one, let's first focus on that.«

Robin grinned playfully at the scene. Yawning quite a bit earlier than usual, Talon didn't even bother finding a retort and instead put one arm each around Tangerine's and Nathan's shoulders. Both couldn't help but give each other an awkward glance, though not necessarily one of discomfort.

»Well, then let's make sure it's a good one, heh.«

»Yes...«, Nathan muttered with a voice as soft and fleeting as molten butter.

»Wanna have your drink? I put extra effort into making it nice, sweet, and colourful«, hy added, leaving hys tight shell a step further. Talon accepted the offer and took a generous sip with obvious enjoyment.

*Pouncing, pulsating, penetrating, the rhythm wheezes,
A trance in hurried, brash nature*

Midnight drew closer when Nathan decided to have a drink of his own. Everyone had switched around places multiple times by now, as it so happens over the course of an evening together. Robin was napping and Talon occupied himself with his phone.

Suddenly, a whisper from Nathan to Tangerine. A sweet, innocent whisper that spoke the language of cute white tulips and budding hyacinths.

»I... would you join me in the kitchen in like, ten minutes? I'd like to ask you something.« His words were unusually distinct, clear from any external force.

Suddenly, a whisper from boy to boy.

A wingspan of sparks.

Nathan giggled at Talon's quiet words, and quickly left for the kitchen. Five minutes later, it was Robin and Tangerine around the table alone.

A baby tortoise, peeking out of its shell

A baby tortoise, feeling all too well

A baby tortoise, daring what life allowed it to

A baby tortoise, kissed back into its shell

A baby tortoise, trembling all too well

Nine minutes until midnight. Whispers still lingering in the thick, humid air. Robin muttered something in his sleep.

For trust's sake, the bear will leave rabbits with snakes

For love's sake, it will pray for sparks in the dark

For nobody's sake, it will break its bones

Here again? Tangerine shook their head violently. A tingling, a rushing, a thunder that made them cower once more. A blooming sun, extinguished with tyrannical ice.

One minute after midnight. Robin was still asleep. Nathan aged on his own. With Talon. But none of that mattered, Tangerine was certain. The focus were the words, those spoken with such expectant vulnerability. As the clock sprung to one minute after midnight, Tangerine got up and carefully walked to the kitchen.

An empty room. A stab? No, a freezing fright. Inhaling and exhaling. Tangerine worried only little. The house wasn't big, and Nathan would be elsewhere. They went upstairs, only to the point of their eyes reaching sight of the upper floor.

A tulip, a daffodil, unrooting their being. All Tangerine could see was the marigold suffocating the moment – until the whimper and whine tore through to them.

*Soaring in the stuffy tragedy
That none could see but all,
All could know; All did hold
That match in the damning cold*

Burnt in flames nothing like passion. All grey and so bloody, all muddy and so hardy. Boy invading boy, touches so unwished for. Talon's fingers trampled the young boy's body and skirt. The door opened; the sludge evicted.

A last afternoon in summer. Tangerine sat by hym. Hys gaze was empty, focused on the wall.

»The pigeons' wings used to give me hope I could fly someday«, hy whispered. »Now all they do is give me sorrow. A part broke off and fell into the black sea.«
»A poem?«

»Reality.« Hys tears fell onto hys skirt with force that made it seem like thumping and thundering against hollow metal.

Robin, Nathan, Tangerine. Just one was sitting. Another sliver of saliva spit into the dark blue plastic bucket. Another urge to puke. Silence that didn't even speak implicitly. Robin sat down next to hym. Tangerine didn't

face hym. The boy whined a bit more, though all his noises were tied together by the pitiable weakness of a dying flame. Hys entire body was trembling. Shaking with sickness, shaking with fear, shaking with more he could even say.

25 and 26 strike anew.

Robin stroked Nathan's back with care. »You don't... He shouldn't.« He tried to bring out words, but the nebulous situation brought the boy to his limits. »I will keep you away from him.«

Tangerine picked up a small notebook. The contents were unintelligible scribbles, except for a few words: »the broken pencil«.

Nathan suddenly looked up at Tangerine as they muttered the words. Hys eyes were wet, radiating the word »traitor«.

Averse

Tangerine sat on the bench. The winds and waters of autumn grew stronger each day, yet this day exuded extraordinary excess. A numbing lingering dread from the skies above, the overcast sky hollowing out all messes.

Nathan lay in hys bed. There was no light in the stuffy room, the curtains concealed what little illumination the outside could have provided. The walls were the shunning grace; they were the soft blanket, moist with the sorrow and thorns of the trembling boy.

Robin walked along the river. He knew Nathan wasn't there, but his mind pictured him riparian, nonetheless. To have such anger cause tears; Robin felt murderous as he flung a pebble into the water, watching it sink in an instant.

Talon

Talon

He

Talon

Aurora held Marianne close to itself. It was a day of violence and a day of caution. It could not help but desire her safe – especially now. The zenith was obfuscated as Aurora tried to find it. Marianne clung to her sibling.

There were more puking nights in the weeks after. Tangerine was there for most of them, sometimes with Robin, sometimes without. Nathan never grew consistent in hys pain and sickness. Tangerine sat on the wooden stool next to the boy, the lights in the corner barely brought visibility.

»Nathan... do you want to...?«

The boy shook hys head.

»I just want you to... know... once you can, you can.«

They softly stroked hys back.

Another attempt at vomit, but nothing in result.

»Tange...«, hy whispered. Hys friend perked up.

»I am not angry.«

Tangerine nodded.

»He did enough to make me furious. Sad. But no. I am fucking afraid. I am numb. I am sick to the bone.«

The words came out as weary whines that had yearned for such clarity for an obviously long time.

»But even then... I feel betrayed.«

Tangerine softly held him as he indicated another wave of fluid emerging – false alarm.

They hummed an old lullaby.

Tangerine stood on the roof, next to the fence. They could feel the needle in their arm sting a bit as they put their hand onto the limiting metal. Not a single person populated the yard despite the hundreds of souls wandering through this hall of convalescence.

»You're still not welcome.«

»I am aware.«

»After all of this, you still choose to ignore wishes?«

»After all of this I still want to... never mind.«

»I do mind. A lot. Enough to-«

Tangerine curled up a bit, the cramp flooding their entire body with the pain of tearing apart.

»You see me in... flames of my tormentor's making. Why must you desire to extinguish the flames of your making with my inability to do so for myself?«

Talon sighed.

»You are a stubborn one.«

»Always have been. Now get lost.«

»I'll go.«

Talon waved goodbye, without response.

The fiery sun in the distance greeted the morning with its cold, fresh reality. A harshness in exercise.

Tangerine placed their right hand back on the near-frosty metal bar and let a sigh beflower the hospital yard down below.

A butterfly echoed the rain from explosive sunbursts through the cracks in oppressive clouds. No amount of dew or breath could draw out more of the depressing and dying light.

Tangerine sat alone in a bus shelter, intertwined in tales to whisper, to shout.

The rain brutally smashed into the concrete and tarmac in front of the shivering youth. Even with warmer clothes than a thin shirt and knee-length skirt the shivering would not have stopped.

A tide to leave be

As it flows by with the locks of lost brunettes

Tangerine, my sour child

In despair you will see

How relief shall cast its nets

To bring you sleep so mild

Proceed as you smile behind, letting them tear up in smiles.

Tangerine shed no tear.

They pulled themselves off the cold metal bench and stormed off into the wet duskiness, only halting to look down upon the railway power cable, thrusting its electricity along the train line below the bridge.

There were no eyes, no voices.

There were no smiles, no woes.

There was no reluctance.

Only the most irrational, deeply random, (optimistically viewed) even fatalistic impulse; Tangerine continued along the bridge in a slower pace, ultimately reaching the edge of the tree-filled district.

A wet Tangerine later sat across a dried-out Nathan. The boy looked them right into the eyes. Hy shook hys head softly, still as numb as the weeks before. Tangerine finally cried. Nathan took them in hys arms.

A comfortable afternoon outside the seasons.

Tangerine struggled unpacking its sandwich. The plastic always ended up eluding its tiny fingers. »Mum? Can you help me?«, the short youth whined. Warm arms embraced it and swiftly rid the meal of the wrapping and

presented Tangerine the soft bread. The 5-year-old eagerly bit into it.

A comfortable scene within a pillow fort on someone's couch.

Tangerine shouted excitedly as he pushed over the evil foe that was the pink plush rabbit at the other end of the fabric cavern. »Leave this place! This is my dungeon, and you are not invited!« With a relatively forceful whack, Tangerine catapulted the plush toy off the couch, the cat on his little bed flinching in response. The 8-year-old opened his arms to console him.

A comfortable holiday in someone's arms.

Tangerine looked up at his face. His jade green eyes met hers. »You're soft«, he whispered. She giggled and nuzzled his cheek. »So are you.«

An uncomfortable brutally hot day across someone's table.

»Tange, you know it better than anyone else. But denial won't help anyone, least of all you.« Tangerine shook their head. »Just... because you think I would understand

this bond in ways that you deem wrong does not make it true.« They put their hands up onto their head, their fingers sliding into the mess of hair.

»I know it's selfish.«

»It is. Big time.«

»You remain just as selfish with what you're doing, though.«

»There's a difference between healthy selfishness and hurting others.«

»I'm certainly hurt.«

»But not hurt by me. Hurt by what you wanted and failed to get.«

»You're really cruel down to the bone.«

»If that's the case you should have realized it sooner. And believe me, my eyes aren't just watery from anger.«
Tangerine wiped their tears off their face.

»But if you only see this shallow me, then I am not surprised you are upset.«

His face scrunched up with even more tears, before his hand reached for the table and toppled it over with a loud thud as it reached the wooden floor.

Tangerine cowered in the chair as he left the room.

A night in cold, trembling fear.

Pursuit of Once Blooming Daffodils

»I don't know which kind of music I would want for my wedding. I doubt I'll ever wanna marry anyone anyway.«
Nathan's gaze was still fixated toward a fluffy cloud that reminded him of his lunch. Robin and Tangerine had been laughing ever since he had pointed out how much the sky represented the rice bowl he had emptied not much earlier.

»Oh, well«, Tangerine began, »that's fair. Honestly, marriage isn't anything for me, either. I don't need the approval of a God, let alone the approval of some bureaucrats for my love.«

»Well, marriage for a different reason might be a possibility«, Robin interjected with a grin. »If you find someone wealthy enough...«

Tangerine shook their head with an amused smile.
»Don't even dare suggest that – I'm not gonna spend time with anyone just for their money. I think I'm too focused on my own happiness for that.«

Nathan giggled softly.

»You say that now, but in reality, you care about others more than anyone I know.«

Tangerine's fingers twitched for a slight moment, and they felt like their entire body grew soft suddenly.
Nathan was too sweet, always.

»If no one here wants a wedding, why not think about music for a funeral?«, Robin mused.

»Pff, that's a turn to the dark«, Tangerine laughed.

»Maybe a funeral march. Although that feels a bit too stern. Perhaps the first movement of Giovanni Battista Viotti's Violin Concerto No.22?«

The other two stared at the frail boy with surprise in their eyes.

»You seem... awfully specific about this, heh.«

»Oh well. I just love digging through some more unknown composers, and this piece seemed fitting.«, Nathan whispered, a bit anxious after the awkward moment.

»I find that fascinating«, Tangerine reassured him with a smile. »Do you have something for my funeral, as well? I would probably want you to decide the music for me, I trust your taste.«

The boy smiled maladroitly. »For you I suppose something dramatic would fit. Like the fifth Violin Concerto by Henri Vieuxtemps. Or maybe even... the Overture of Alcyone by Marin Marais.«

Robin lied back down in the fresh grass of the hill.

»Alcyone? You think that fits to Tangerine?«

Tangerine turned toward their childhood friend. »Do you know the overture as well?«

»No, but the myth. It feels... macabre.«

»Well, then I'd deem it perfect!«, they laughed, throwing themselves back into the grass as well. Only Nathan remained sitting, his thoughts by now drifting through many different possibilities for funeral music.

»Nathan.« The boy shrieked for the fraction of a second as he was pulled out of his mind space. »Alcyone sounds good. Let's just take that.« They gave him another reassuring smile, which he reluctantly returned before lying down next to the two.

»I'm still not sure about this, Robin.«

»I know. But we need to at least try to get him out.«

»But this... feels so forceful. I don't know another way, no, but such an attempt feels wrong.«

»Let's just see how it'll go.«

Nathan dawdled behind the two, his eyes permanently fixated on the ground below. There were small, dried stains of blood at the edge of his nostrils. The tears drew out the red fluid as well.

»Nathan, shall we go a bit slower?«

He shook his head with a barely perceptible motion.

»Okay.«

Tangerine felt a bit dizzy, seeing the boy so deeply

sunken into black water with no sign of ever pulling himself out of it.

Robin visibly suppressed a sigh. This day was still a step forward – every other endeavour to lure the boy outside had faced an apologetic and awkward laugh with more or less convincing excuses.

A late night in comforting heater warmth.

»You've got something on your nose, Tangie~«

»Oh, you're one to talk, you dork!«, Tangerine retorted, pointing towards the blue dot of paint on his nose.

»Well, at least not my *entire* face is full of watercolours!« He briefly poked their nose tip and then proceeded to tickle them behind their ear. Tangerine giggled and fled by sliding a bit back.

»If you continue like that, I'll have the paint all over my body!«

»With how pale you are, you could really use the colour~« Tangerine rolled their eyes.

»I just have very noble skin~«, they chuckled, »And not being pale is no excuse for being this free of some extra colour!«

Tangerine dipped a finger into the blueish purple paint and carefully smeared a cat paw onto his cheek.

*Blessed are you within the serenity of voice,
And blessed is the fruit of your blood and ascent.*

*Your fairness and hys gifts will become an undoing;
That of the world and that of the spirited emotion.*

»Where is this train taking us?«

»You'll see. It won't be anything wild, so don't worry.«

Nathan did visibly worry still, and hys soft fairy-like eyelashes lost their grace as hy blinked rapidly. The sun filled the train from the window they were sitting at. Tangerine quickly took a photo of the sunset.

Most of the train ride was silent. Nathan's eyes face the grey, dirty floor. Tangerine watched the trees storm past the train wagon. Robin was on his phone.

Around 40 minutes later they left the train and walked along a slightly jagged walkway which appeared to be more of a trail than an actual path. Nathan's face had finally lit up a bit more, though the deeper dullness remained in hys eyes.

»So, you're taking me into nature?«

»That too, yes.«

»You want to think that this would help?«

»It's no use hiding it. But just wait.«

Autumn had yet to set in. The leaves on the trees remained vibrant and succulent, still. Nathan, as much as he usually adored autumn, had priorly hinted at how much he hates the departure of summer. That was one of the few things Tangerine had managed to get out of him in the past days other than just »mhm« and »no«. Robin took the lead and pulled a bit of shrubbery aside to pave the way for the other two.

Once the bushes got thinner and less numerous, Tangerine could finally see their destination. Nathan quietly gasped at the sight.

By the time of their arrival at the glade it had already gotten dark. With the night engulfing the three friends, the main attraction became all the more enchanting. A large, rough rock stood proudly a bit left to the centre of the small lake (or almost pond), only a bit of moss covering the tip. Several smaller flowers had made it their home and enjoyed the luminous greeting of a cloud of fireflies. Tangerine hadn't visited in years, but the view was still just as magical as back then. The fireflies moved eagerly around the brownish rock.

»This is beautiful.«

Tangerine smiled at the remark.

»I suppose it is a nice distraction for a bit.«

Robin silently sat down in the grass, watching the glowing insects, and listening to the injured words of his friend.

After a few minutes, a sole firefly made its way over to Nathan, glowing rather weakly. The boy allowed it to land on his hand. It walked around in his palm for a few seconds, and, invigorated, flew back to the rock again. By the time the not yet full moon had joined the dance of sparkling lights as a reflection in the water, Tangerine cramped and pressed themselves against Robin.

»Don't worry, we'll get you back quickly.«

»I know... argh... just take care of Nathan, please.«

»Of course.«

»Hy's shut down again, I think.«

»As expected.«

»Go to him.«

Robin closed the taxi door and moved to the back where Nathan sat. The drive began, and Robin's eyes kept going back and forth between Tangerine and Nathan.

»I don't buy that explanation. What he said.«

»...«

»Do you?«

»We should wait for Tangerine's response to this.«

»...alright. I still don't buy it.«

»Why?«

»It's not like them to be careless.«

»I don't think it's a thing of being careless.«

»What do you know?«

»...and what do *you*?«

Tears began welling up in Nathan's eyes. Hy was ready to close his mouth again for good.

I do wonder where the trails of these winds lead. They touch me, and I shiver – yet they aren't me, they aren't close to me. They merely grow sickness.

Another sickness brought Tangerine back to the hospital on a cold, windy night – this time much further away from the infirmity brought upon themselves. An ohm to tears, and now a strike from outside, pulling the fragile one deeper into viral, numbing clutches.

»Oh. For some reason I almost expected someone else.«

»If you don't want my company, I can leave you alone, Tange.«

They shook their head.

»Okay.«

»There is only one I don't want to see right now.«

»I can imagine...«

»Not to the extent you think you can.«
 »Perhaps. Who knows.«
»I am pretty certain.«
 »It's been a while since I've been a patient here.«
»I never knew that you ever had been, Robin.«
 »It was after my fifteenth week of it.«
»Your arms?«
 »No. Thighs. Needle poking.«
»Unconventional.«
 »No idea. It just kind of kept going.«
»I see.«

*It is ironic, the smile
You give me as you stand upon the currents
Ripping you to shreds
As though your wish for doom
Were as true
As your burnt down eyes
Whispered*

»Where will the winds take us?«
 »Dunno.«
»Where will this night take us?«
 »Probably to an early grave if we don't get off the roof soon. It's windy as hell, and I'm sure your doctor did not have you getting a cold on top of everything in mind.«

Tangerine picked up a small, separated piece out of the stone floor tiles of the roof, and threw it over the metal fence off the roof.

»That doctor can go right to hell where I'll join him.«

»Harsh?«

»Deserved. He berated me over nothing.«

»He'd have enough reason to do so right now.«

»Heh. I'd rather want to scold someone myself.«

»I know.«

»Oh well. Let's get back inside.«

They took Robin's hand and left the roof.

When Talon was bound to his bed, Tangerine rushed over with Robin and Nathan. The latter hesitated at first, but painfully agreed to visit after all in the end. As they entered Talon's room, Nathan seemed to grow nauseous immediately. Tangerine inched closer to the ill boy in his bed.

»You can't even hide your smile.«

Tangerine shook their head.

»You are imagining things, Talon.«

»Hy is not stupid, either.«

»Oh well. We both had to do something.«

»You are crazy.«

»And you need rest. I'm not just letting you get away

easily after any of that.«

Talon sighed. Tangerine liked the thought of finding acceptance in the exhale.

»There is nothing I can say.«

»There is nothing you *should* say. This has never been about you.«

»Way to treat a sick friend, heh.«

»Way to treat a sick-«

Tangerine turned away with their eyes closed. There was too much venom in the air.

A faint thud of a chair toppled over brought them to the floor. Robin brought them to the door, leaning them against it. Nathan walked up to Talon.

»I feel sorry for you. And I feel with you. Sincerely.«

»I know. That is what makes everything hurt even more.«

Nathan whined for a second.

»You say that as though that's not the case for me. I know both selves inside of you. The father, and the king. The riding consoler, and the violent seductor.«

»You speak in riddles.«

»I speak in my best language.«

»Riddles.«

»Everyone names it differently.«

Nathan sat down on the bed next to Talon and carefully

caressed his cheek. It was as soft as ever.

»Even with Tangerine your eyes sparked your fire in so bold and admirable ways. A flame that could have easily befriended mine if it hadn't tried to consume me.«

»I'm so sorry, Nathan.«

»I know you are«, hy replied with a fluttering whisper.

I'm the broken pencil who stabs your veins.

And

I'm the broken pen who still draws your ink.

»You remember your words?«

»Words?«

»The notebook. Fungicides. You truly adore me more than just in one way, don't you?«

Talon didn't say a word, and neither did Nathan.

Tangerine sat on the cold bench. The wind was strong, and its gusts swept past with a heavy, autumnal pull. A bittersweet smile escaped the youth and flew high up into the air.

»Here you are, Tange.«

Aurora made its way over and sat down on the bench as well. Its hair appeared a bit unkempt.

»Robin told me you'd be up here. You seem to love the hospital roof a lot.«

Tangerine nodded silently.

»Well, it wasn't really Robin who told me, but Marianne who had listened to Robin talking about you.«

Its mouth grew into a mocking grin.

»With how dedicated he is towards you, I'm surprised there's nothing going on.«

»Friendship exists.«

»Not doubting that. And you have made a good pick with-«

»No choice has been made, Aurora.«

Both of them sat in silence. Only the howling wind painted the noon atmosphere.

»I've visited Talon's room before coming up here.«

»We see each other in the hallways sometimes. We're both on the same floor.«

»He seems miserable.«

»He was made as miserable as he's made others.«

Aurora shook its head with a laugh that Tangerine could only identify as disbelief.

»When will you be dismissed?«

»Three days. I want to see Nathan again.«

»We all do.«

»He's still holed up in his room, huh.«

»Mhm.«

»He wouldn't be himself if he weren't.«

»Well, he has every right to be.«
»...«
»...«
»They've removed the needle. The infusion.«
»That's good. I remember how much it used to bother me.«
»I got used to it; yet getting rid of it still felt like leaving a burden behind.«
»And your dependence.«
»And the soft, simple notes that brought me to most nostalgic worlds back in sprouting.«
»You and Nathan sure are alike.«
»I suppose so.«

A Summer Night's Departure

A smoking cloud to evaporate the vigour and vivacity into the night sky. The eyes of the moon hummed an ode to a celebratory past.

*I gaze upon the stars tonight, the darkness has vanished
My night is my light, a fall to bid farewell
A flourishing, content fright, the fairies rest
I claim the night, before he can claim my spirit
For pained we remain the same, but stronger we'll bloom*

Nathan gave Robin and Tangerine a sickly smile as they returned to him and the rental car. He could see the smoke from afar, the skirt, the dirt, the nightly melodies, and winds. Robin sat down in the driver's seat, Tangerine and Nathan in the back, one head on another's shoulder.

»Are you two ready to leave this dusty mess behind?«, Robin chuckled as he started up the car.

»I think we are«, Tangerine replied, looking over to Nathan and seeing him nod almost eagerly.

»It should be dark by the time we arrive. But we will make it to the fireworks in time, no matter the traffic.«

»I want to paint the illuminated night sky...«

Nathan put his head on Tangerine's shoulder again and whispered into their ear.

»We can paint together. I brought my pastel chalk.«
They both smiled and returned to the usual silence.
Nathan softly drifted into sleep, and Tangerine's mind
travelled far yonder.

The melodies crunched inside the tape, echoing through
softest metal casings, arriving in souls; drawing out
their pale and feverish being:

A blooming tree's fruit in selfish selflessness,
A withering beauty in cupped hands,
A plush warmth with resolute love,
A stampede long gone without wiping away.

*Four thirds in summer nights,
they face, all-shaking,
the dandelions soaring past winter.*

*I do wonder where the trails of these winds lead. They touch me,
and I shiver – yet they aren't me, they aren't close to me. They
merely grow sickness.*

*The stars I care not for. There is no more thrilling light than
that which we are already so deeply drowning in. And stray
lights I will continue to follow.*

*It is but with a tinge of lavender that I gaze upon fireflies
For even with the brittle pride inside they inevitably give rise
To mesmerizing horizons beyond their nocturnal desires;
To strange sparks distant from modest campfires*

*In the end, the paths show us the way past the trembling fear
slumbering and waking;
They reveal the numerous lights and darks, greys, lacks, and
what we're forsaking;
They bring the summer nights framing our lives into a
structure of years, and force
Us to crawl along, quickly, crushing through what we miss; we
choose our remorse;
Gazing and watching is the harbinger of clarity, and the
downfall of movement.*

*A softly frail, and boldly proud Tangerine bids farewell to
summer,
Sitting on a lifeless bench and watching the darker clouds;
They welcome the unruly waves awaiting, and the warmth
brought inside.
No fall this sombre, numb, and comforting ever before.*

