





The Last Man I Loved in Las Vegas

Pran Phucharoenyos

Monday: Blue Diamond is nowhere near blue, all orange and purple, and I am shoving a powdered beignet down my mouth, sugar melting and sticking to the back of my teeth. I can't go home because I'll cry into my mother's hands again, and the boulevard is speckled with Birds of Nevada and men faking fevers for attention, while I burn through Newports all day on someone else's lighter. I left my jade jewelry at home and threw out another pair of black heels, having run through another pair after two months.

Mid-summer I spent with my keys in the door, white lines on a Tuesday, black holes on a Friday, and I wasn't really looking for a little fortune, at least a little less than a way to get sober. I call an old friend to tell the story of what you've put me through; I hear I did to him what you did to me. Jeff Buckley, Pablo Neruda become gods of July, so when that big lonely feeling no longer creeps but slams, the record plays through and through. I figured a minimum wage job in Nevada would fill the cavity, and that you couldn't get wasted if you couldn't afford it. Luck didn't build up the Monte Carlo but it definitely made up Vegas according to me, so my two dollar bills and single fiver find new glittery slots to digest in. June gloom extended itself an unwelcome stay well into August, killing itself as soon as I stepped onto the devil's backbone. Along with it I give up your ghost again, or at least I say so equally to myself and the desert wind and the boulevard and her

green glow eases me into a complacent state where the memory of your barely calloused hands feels more like Santa Ana's tempestuous whisper. Nothing exactly notable in society is occurring in Las Vegas besides campaigning for the upcoming election, so the entirety of Paradise, Nevada was left open to interpret whichever way, though inevitably the Tybalts and Judases of The Great Basin will climb out of some inferno to greet sweet women, open arms, Utah abandoned.

Tuesday: Starshine Avenue and the coals of our deafening flame still flickering and in the heat, I cross the road with a slim old American fault and images that come together like watermelon and tarantulas. You called me a saint until I ruined your life, and the many saints of the Bellagio fountain point at my cheek to laugh at my little sequined dress, waiting for another man to call me shrill. So I walk down Paradise Boulevard, 2am's kiss on my wrist, the world slowing, streets emptying as a classic Italian sonata sings through the speakers, the waters of the Bellagio singing along, an engineering miracle only because I don't understand the mechanics of programmed water pressure. I head home.

Bruises on both my knees I tell myself to sleep on it later for the hundredth fifty-seventh time in a row while the full ashtray looks at me as if I have left something unsaid to it. To the boulevard again. Vaya con Diós, quede con Diós.

Wednesday: The world of Frank Sinatra Boulevard is complete within itself, no outside force nor evil needed to extend its potential for pleasurable corruption. I say a prayer to him off the Neon Gateway, when the woman of a cherry red sedan, young and easily beautiful, takes a drag off a cigarette out the driver's window, opens the door, vomits, slams it shut, takes another drag, and waves to me as I draw a heart in the air for her. I would not dare to think of the boulevard as a scar to be rid of and make Nevada beautiful again, though admittedly, I am tempted to think so when Presley's iconography and desperation of a man believed to be unloved by only himself litters the boulevard, and I miss your teeth, so I resign to tell you to meet me in the Little White Chapel, or at least the desert, and because I know you won't, I go back to Billie Holiday. You are Irish, so your goodbyes are so— another step towards the chapel door and the promised atrial heart flutter arises. I leave without a white dress, without a look down the aisle, as if lovers of the desert will find any viewers of other persuasions unkempt, haughty.

Thursday: I smoke up an old pack until my nose begins to bleed as the blackjack dealer lends me a soft smile, and before he can offer me a napkin to smear the two drops of blood off my chest, I head to the bathroom and spray perfume to cover up the stench of myself, specks of red on my dollar bills. I wash my hands of decomposing, dead leaf residue from the rose bouquet I passed by the lobby on my right fingertips because I can't resist touching disgusting things. The feeling is lost as the blue-chipped men dealing tonight refuse to piece me back together as they fall towards each other in laughter and shit luck, another loss sifted to the bottom of the Vegas green-glow ocean. The many saints of Enchanted Wells smile down, and I head to Chinatown for the comfort of a crying tiger dish, losing the way until I find myself down the avenue that John O'Brien never found himself leaving. Strolling down Four Queens, Fremont, inherently anachronistic, obliges me to think of a man I stayed here with when I was about twenty. Floating by is the image of him sick all over himself, only to wake up the next morning, accosting me where I slept on the floor, demanding if I had taken money from the wallet he drunkenly threw at the dealer the night before. I took my time leaving him, convinced of his "factitious disorder imposed by self" and his lies about his imaginary counterfeit cancer, though looking back with a laugh, I last heard is still alive. Alameda Alamo.

Friday: Arizona says *Ditat Deus*, California: I have found it, *Nil sine numine* Colorado, Nevada—All For Our Country.

Friday, again: Forced burlesque nights of debauchery impersonates progression and it doesn't escape my mind that I could have a gun strapped to my inner thigh and I would have been welcomed in all the same if I had the cards and a tenner or two stuffed in a little dress. The Levin to your Vronksy enters from left stage, quietly and carrying his individual vision of candor and confidentiality. The sweet doctor who keeps my origami in his wallet kisses my temple to the beat, sun bunny bronzer on my bare cheek, even after I tell him I'm unfit for someone so gentle; the Vegas affair where pathological high-rollers keep watch. The most tender souvenir wraps his arms around me, hand on my face as he says it's a heat check, calling himself a limiting reagent. I tell him I don't know what that means.

Tolstoy's Levin aside, the mature desert of a caramel dream inspires Tennesseean Honey whiskey to remain by my side, turning on ambient television to watch the Citadel come for the War Rig, bald and painted delicate men screaming, pleading for a witness. I wake up drunk,

standing naked in front of the window, cigarette ash collecting on my collar bones, convincing myself I surely see again the Santa Ana wind rushing the sand from one dune to another shore. You will never have seen it as I have unless you come again with me, though I will have to thoroughly break your heart again so you see it to the full effect.





young elvis watches me slumber

Stephen Ground

& no,
I do
not
care to
elaborate.



Photo Deletion

Jan Wiezorek

In the deletion of photographs,
I realize who I am. The traveler
who returns, placing his nose
against glass, hoping to see what
he imagines might be there.
Because is a beautiful bench
blessing you today like a cutout.
The heart wounded, stop motion,
quenched by waters, dove-spirited
by mercy, seeing family silhouettes
taking their wash to the river, sitting
by boulders for fish kabob, walking
for hours to get here, and finally
resting in a gazebo.

Her plastic white purse. A giant
cup of strawberry ice cream: but
it's only a plastic pull on the purse,
made for blues, soul, and image,
not refreshment. If you get a chance,
take a disco break on the pirate
skeleton who smiles beside his open
stash of jewels, abounding with its
own smiles. And you know, the only
treasure is belief in your own family;
and Paul is not with me, so I know
it's time to walk home toward sunset.
I guess I don't have that photo,
but I've learned more about myself.



The Specimen

Albert Sholem

“What about this one, Rex?”

“Does it *Woo!* at all?”

“Hmm. I don’t know, but I suppose it does look quite docile. Here’s what its label says.”

A particular and saturnine specimen. It often laments that it was once the son of a father, and the brother of a brother. While this specimen lacks athleticism and appears to be blind in its dominant eye—it has a proclivity towards domestic labour and composing technical correspondences.

“Who would want *that?*”

“I’m not sure, Rex...What about this one over here?!”



Forty-Three Labels

Ashley Mangtani

The coordinator asked for his name.

"Raymond," Dad said.

Which were right.

Then he told her he'd been a carpenter all his life.

Which weren't.

He were a postman for thirty-two year. He knew every street in Old-ham by name. They gave him a plaque when he retired.

We put it in the loft when we moved him.

There were nowhere to hang it here.

She wrote down carpenter. I let her.

Eli pressed his face to the window. Out in the garden, three residents sat in plastic chairs. None of them moving much.

"There's a cat," he said.

There weren't.

I did the labels the night before. Masking tape and permanent marker. Raymond Holt pressed into every shirt collar.

Every pair of trousers.

The comb he'd kept since before I were born.

My mam used to say he'd take that comb to his grave.

I wrote his name on the plastic. The first one smeared, so I wrote it again.

Forty-three labels.

The coordinator took us to the room. Dad sat on the bed.

He pressed both palms into the mattress—that same flat-palmed bounce from the Sunday furniture sales, his face set like he were gathering evidence.

That were still him.

Right there.

He looked up at the coordinator. "Have you met our lass?" he said. "She comes Thursdays."

I were three feet away.

Eli turned from the glass. "That's me mam," he said.

Dad looked at me.

His mouth opened, then closed again. "Diane. I know it's you, ya daft 'apeth."

He said my name. The one he'd chosen. He said it with the stress on the wrong syllable, sounding like a question he already knew the answer to.

Then he turned back to the coordinator. "Good lass, our Diane," he said. "She comes Thursdays, don't you, pet?"

I locked my knees to keep from swaying.

We walked him to the dining room. He sat across from a stranger and told him he'd been a carpenter for forty year. Built some solid stuff. The man said that was something.

Dad picked up his fork. He wrapped his thick fingers around the handle and started to eat, looking like he'd sat at this table every day of his life.

In the car park, our breath came out white. "Does Grandad know where he is?" Eli asked.

I unlocked the car doors. "He's settling in."

"He didn't know you, though," he said.

"He did. Just for a minute."

Eli went quiet. He were six. A minute still counted at six.

At the junction, I kept my foot on the brake

In the rearview, Eli stared back at the building. Waiting the way he did when a film finished, expecting something more to happen. On the back seat were two shirts with no labels. I'd run out of tape.

Dad's own father were a carpenter.

Died donkeys ago.

There were no photographs of him in our house. No old chisels in the shed. Just a name that dropped out of the air the day they buried him.

Dad had spent thirty-two year wearing the map of Oldham into the soles of his boots.

He came home smelling of damp wool and exhaust fumes, his right shoulder permanently drooped from the canvas strap.

Not a speck of sawdust on him.

And now here he was, building himself from whatever parts remained.

Carpenter.

Father of three.

Raymond. Which were still true.

I hadn't put my name anywhere he could find me.

Not on a label, not on anything.

The light went green.

I just watched it.





Inherited Light

Karen Zhao

There is a particular kind of silence
inside convenience stores at 11 p.m.

A fluorescent hum.
Hands smelling faintly of cardboard.
Receipt paper curling like dead skin.

Somewhere, a voicemail left unanswered
in another language.

Somewhere, a younger self
still standing at the edge of an ocean
believing the world could be crossed
simply by wanting it badly enough.

And now I am here,
filling out forms about the future
with a mechanical pencil,
being told my life is something
I can choose from a list.

What do you want to become?

As if becoming
has ever been a solitary thing.

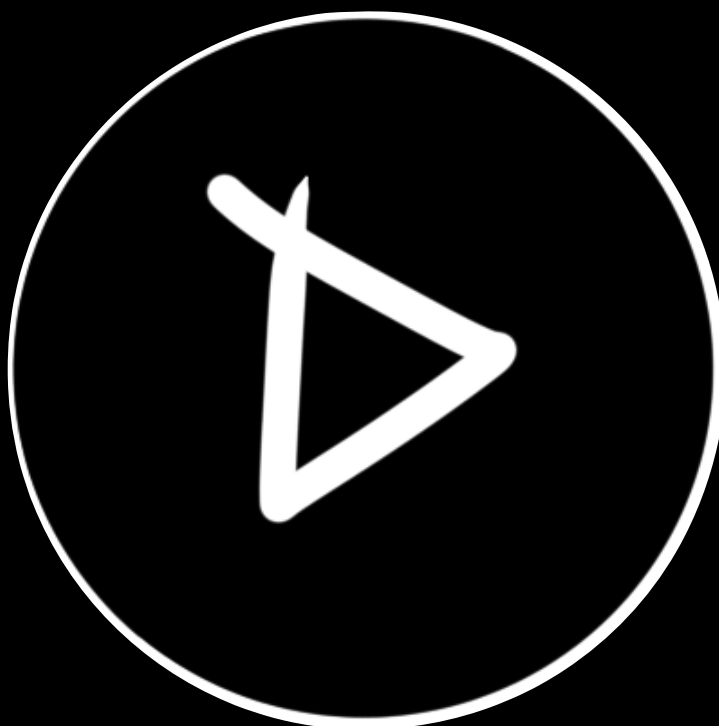
As if lives are not already waiting beneath ours
unlived ones, unfinished ones
pressed quietly into the seams of our days.

I think of movement more than sacrifice.
Of bodies continuing forward
through weather that does not care about them.
Of exhaustion passed hand to hand
until it becomes something survivable.

Maybe that is what love turns into over time:
not speeches, not grand gestures,
just someone carrying the weight of the wind
long enough
for you to keep walking.

And maybe after years of this,
after enough silent acts of endurance,
something begins to live inside me too,
a kind of warmth
I didn't make myself.

Like someone slipped a small sun into my chest
years ago
and trusted me
not to let it die.



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book: <https://a.co/d/8bTfxxI>

“Photo Deletion” by Jan Wiezorek
Book: Forests of Woundedness
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“Inherited Light” by Karen Zhao

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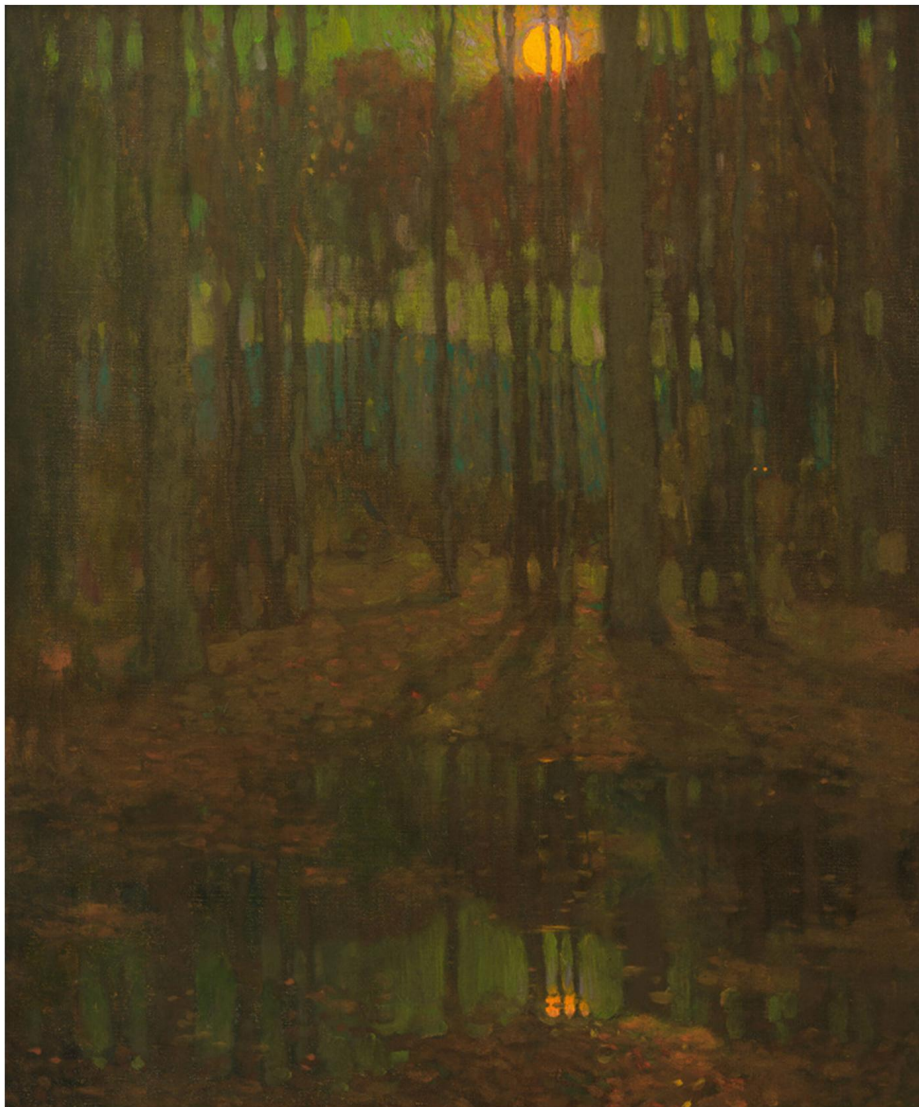
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