

Derivae, or, the Book of Dead Names

by Lucretia Indrid

What was that? Nothing. No more. Start over.

Another hill slips below the horizon line. Light fills the carriage – a dying blaze of late August. As my eyes adjust I take in my surroundings: the coffee cup, frayed upholstery of creaking wooden chairs, the leather satchel spilling open, the book: bound in cloth and twine, the screen of my laptop glowing faintish green. Artefacts of a life no more or less real than the voices in my head, or the soul's immortality. But these things I can touch.

This landscape is devouring me, its undulations suggesting a pattern unpermitted in nature. Like splitting chrysalides in the brain, or the the flies that sleep for a centuries only to be roused by particular climatic conditions – motions of the air, salinity of rain, shapes in the heavens – so rise my unremembered pasts. I'm hypnotised by these features, rendered abstract in motion: pathways into furtive coprses, windmills of lonely farms, or high above, the ominous discolorations of the firmament belying a distant sea.

My eyes sting at the corners, though I know this state is fleeting. The shadows grow long, and in the instances of fragmentary clarity there appear things between things. That move with a pace and purpose wholly distinct from this slumbrous imago of the rural dusk. Night isn't falling, it's creeping out from a multitude of holes: vacuities permeating the landscape, growing in boldness even as the light swells to hold them in check, until the moment a rising tide of dark shall join them all together. The wildness is growing, and soon another hill shall swallow us. The cut that is always coming.

I blink hard again, pushing my fingers through heavy, falling locks of auburn hair. I try to focus. Focus on the dread that my gut knows but my brain somehow cannot fathom enough to process. Focus on the page in front of me, getting it all down.

New document – blank page. The caret stands alone. It recalls a figure, standing in an open field, perhaps witnessed from afar; the highest window of a house, or the steeple of a country church. Phasing in and out of existence, its every blink is an accusation. Because only moments ago this page, and untold others, were filled with words whose author can be none but myself. And yet I do not recall writing them, and could not read them, and could only think to delete them; deftly, in three quick strokes. The words I write now are a barrier, dividing the now from the illimitable before. I compose them in the desperate hope that what I set down will contain something other than finality. Maybe something good. Something whose loss I fear more than the temptation to hit CTRL+Z however many times it took to bring them all springing back into existence. But still there is this dread. It tells me even if I were to start over; close the programme, start afresh, the words may yet resurface; leeching through the page, bolder than whatever utterances I scatter like doomed seeds over their unquiet grave. The words of my nemesis.

Whatever my fate, I must get this down. Though my life is forfeit, I still have posterity; the name I carve into the wall of whatever dungeon claims me. I hover my cursor over the little battery symbol in the bottom right of my screen. It tells me I have two hours remaining. I suppose it could be lying, but I would love to have back whatever time I spent writing all those things that I did not write, and which refuse to remember.

But what do I now remember? By what likeness shall I know the thing that haunts me? I can summon only dissolute fragments. The unusual newts in the water of the courtyard pond in what had once been the town hall. The hostile emptiness of the station concourse. The greyness of the sky over the city in autumn on the morning I departed. The face of my friend Eitenne, in whose eyes I first beheld that strange look. And the moment that damns me still, that day he told me of what he read in the *Book of Dead Names*.

There is a quality of lucidity that is almost never felt in the normal path of life. Man or woman may live the full span of their years and never know its like. It comes at the crescendo of a

dream, when the whole of a self-contained history resolves on a moment of singular abjection. A tangible void that opens only when the conviction becomes unassailable; soul-deep and adamantine strong, and the bars of hell's cage tower in the distance in every direction, burning so bright they destroy whatever parts of your retinas they in that moment occupy, so that even once it passes, your every living moment will see them growing and spreading, until they at last consume you in the eternal blindness of damnation. Will and circumstance conspire to this perfect moment, and the act that brands you the worst person to ever draw breath. The cosmic perfection of crime. Who'd have guessed you'd be the one to find out?

And then you wake up. And you stare blindly into the wholly mundane shadows of your bedroom, as familiar things begin to materialise in the glow of the street lamp outside your wholly mundane window, and you thank whatever God exists to bear witness to the fact that even though you were chosen to know it, however intimately, the guilt was never yours. And yet, somewhere, in the multitude of universes over which only dreams may stray, there exists a self, and a moment, and a will, and an act, and a crime, and it really happened, and it is written in succinct and elegant prose in the Book of Dead Names.

It was not Eitenne who told me this, though he spoke of something similar. This was the testament of a stranger on the internet. Someone who used an alias. So did many others, and each with their own version of *the Book*. Uniformly distinct, only idiosyncrasies of syntax told one from the next: recursive ironies, tics and tells, strains of pathology bleeding into form. Dissolving again in a sea of mutual anonymity, as if adhering to a secret spontaneous pact to remain unconnectable; floating identifiers with differently fanciful accounts of a thing upon whose nature none could agree.

These voices that came to me in the furtive late hours of the night would talk amongst themselves, chiding and demeaning all but first principles. It was if the book itself were something

in the nature of a special plea. A message from the cosmos whose true meaning was the singular property of its recipient. An incommunicable act of faith.

As for Etienne, his *Book of Dead Names* was treatise on the nature of disappearance: a manual on writing oneself out of existence. But unlike those faceless and foolish weavers online, Etienne was real. As real as the yellowing leaves of the trees overhead, the dappling sunlight on the pavements as we walked together through the outskirts of downtown, and the veiled amusement in his voice as he made this disclosure. That contrary to everything that gave form to this moment, he was, in fact, no longer really here. That this, my phantom flesh companion, endured only by the strength of my own disbelief.

Hours later that same disbelief found me on a train, the same in which I sit now, writing, borne into this unfathomable night of stars. *Go to any town that you define as home – Etienne said this – it needn't be the town of your birth or even the one you thought would at one time be permanent, and it cannot be your home now for it must be of the past. One wherein you spent an appreciable period of your formative existence (ten years will suffice) and whose departure carried a weight that is still yours. Not all will have such a place – a different fate awaits them if they do what you're planning. That is, go to the library. Even a small town will have more than one; there's the county service, but it need not be; what about the school? Maybe the local hospital has one. Perhaps a museum or a private collection. Pick whichever you prefer, in fact it is better that you do. The only criteria is that it must have a catalogue. Start with whatever subject it pleases you to study, follow the cross references or ponder the marginalia, all avenues will eventually find you at the entry for the Book of Dead Names, author Unknown.*

And then, with a last flick of his shadowing locks, his eyes meeting mine across the void, he added in tones of finality: *Take a name, or add another. Its owner has naught left to care.*

It hits me just as I step onto the platform, a nostalgia that feels like you're being watched. So as the train pulls away I remain in place, steadfast and precarious, until not even the green-laden branches of the overhanging trees trembled in testament to its passing. Then, just as suddenly, I could move again. The past is beckoning from the white-painted awning, and the stairs leading down. This trajectory know intimately. Ours is a small town but close enough to the city to mark a useful intersection of other places – the signs beneath the stairs to their platforms bear their names. I read them in passing as I approach the end of the tunnel and the cavernous ticket hall beyond.

It is midday now. In these words I make an affirmation because the vision that locks me into this moment is close to being displaced by another, older, vision. One of a memory whose sense and seeming are strong enough to pull me under. Here, I know, it is summer, too. But cruel dawn has drained its warmth. I am running but I know not whether I am entering or leaving, and all the while the ancient clock and the flitting departure board beat a heady tick, like a chorus of angry feet. All things turn in sync. But there is only one exit, and no blameless soul is going anywhere else this early on a Sunday.

Standing now in the doorway the lay of the town is acquiring substance. Yet the valley into which our town was spawned forces a linearity, its precipitous sides compressing and folding the dimensions of place. In this illusion of depthlessness, the sacred sites of my history become visible in sequence. And one seems to burn brighter than the others.

The house lies in its upper strata, among others of its kind. Large, detached, old but with modern amenities. Unostentatious, they hide their grandeur in sheltering trees. But the features are recognisable at once; the rose bushes rising like palisades, the little balcony on the second floor set into the sloping roof above the front door, the circular corner room jutting out like a medieval turret, just shy of tasteless. It's to this last I'm drawn. I feel its pull even from the street, and its every detail whispers danger. For I know who once lived here, and in memory still does. For I'm already there.

Before me is a face – my own. Younger, cleanly shaven, tired, damp with wine-sweat. Handsome despite the ravages of evening. Framed in an oval mirror bordered in mother of pearl. A single bulb hovers above. Ensconced in bronze, its halo of light encompasses a deep, chipped sink, set into a slab of marble; white mixed with striations of rose pink and grey. Bottles of unspecified fluids cluster perilously around its rim in assorted pastel shades, grimed with dust, all but fixed in place by the accumulation of yellowed limescale and soap detritus congealed at their base. A landscape of exquisite feminine decay. Beyond the mirror, pale structures of shelves and curtain rails glimmer, weightless, where the light fails to reach. A static canvas waterfall shrouds a claw foot tub, while above, black on muted amaranth, imitation ivy clusters a firmament of mildewed floral simulacra.

Behind me is the bedroom of the one who lives here. Cut off from the rest of the house by her quarters, this is the inner sanctum of Miranda, my girlfriend. Her essence imbues this place, a residual kind of *self* that in spite of every conviction that had brought me to this juncture, I find myself adoring. I look again at my face, seeing through eyes that are my own, into those of the young man I had been, and in them finding not a shred of doubt. Yet why is it I cannot look to the door, and contemplate what I know lies beyond that threshold, in those black recesses of cloying velvet, the saline damp of this heavy summer's night.

For Miranda's grief is behind that door. It roves the dark like a great, wounded animal - heavy and dangerous. An oppressive vapour of confusion and ruined hope muffling its bone breaking tread. This configuration is what traps me, her grief and my cowardice, joined with the knowledge that my presence here was a once so treasured privilege. This antechamber is become my dungeon; and grief my keeper, all the stronger for I am unambiguously its cause.

And yet I fear only half the guilt, for I share it with another.

A different night descends. Through my reverie my feet brought me to the shuttered doorway of a restaurant, the scene of a gathering earlier that same summer. This recollection is stuttering sharp.

There are nine of us around the table, a private booking in an upstairs room and already a scene of minor carnage. Across from me, as ever, is Stephen. Stephen was the one who'd originally introduced me to the company I found myself in that night. Though companions since childhood, his parents' fortunes far outstripping my own had seen us attending different schools. Nevertheless my mother's accomplished networking had allowed our friendship to defy the otherwise impermeable dividing lines of the town's societal microstructures. Yet it was qualities I had developed myself, mostly by virtue the precarious exception I knew myself to occupy, that secured me in their esteemed company. That and Miranda's guileless affections. Moving clockwise, there is Helen (Stephen's sometime *on good terms* ex), then the twins: Clement and Camille, outliers from an overlapping secondary group whose core I could never quite ascertain. Then Miranda (of course), and Stephanie (a friend). Finally, sitting at the head of the table – since it is, among other things, his birthday – sits Sebastian, Miranda's brother.

Thin, he is of slender, rather girlish aspect, offset only by those great hooded eyes that turn slumberously about when observed, though never seem to move on a casual glance. His hair is of a dark brown that passes for black in daylight, but in ideal conditions – picked out from above or silhouetted from a single source in a darkened space – unveils deep crimson hues. The same as his sister's. He nurses a Bordeaux with a studied boredom, posturing just so as to let conversation form a web around him, and touching not a single strand. A rare gift. Of his summer – for it is now August – very little is known. Every member of his family but Sebastian himself has, separately, in one way or another, expressed the hope that this is the Autumn Sebastian finally takes up his scholarship to one of several auspicious institutions. And each, I note, giving different accounts of his intended subject. There are many hypotheticals. Graduating as he did at sixteen, his impeccable

references nonetheless remain locked in the impregnable mahogany vault of Sebastian's bureau, glowing even as they gather dust. His subsequent studies, for all their informality, have been by all accounts no less rigorous. Mutual acquaintances spoke of travels in Europe, making inroads into the literary circles of various cities and, in all, cutting almost as much of a dash as his sister, Miranda. Although I shan't bore you with her accomplishments; those are easier to find out for yourself.

But one is absent from the scene: myself. Deftly excusing myself, I've gone downstairs to where the bar joins the main restaurant, where I wait on a drink. It's Friday and the wait staff are overrun, but I'm in no particular hurry to rejoin the sweating clamour upstairs. So I take a moment to study the ancient bottles that adorned the dusty shelves above the bar, wondering how many of these impressively vintage-dated specimens are corked. Outside, two girls talk animatedly, cigarettes amid fluttering fingers – I watch them for a moment, studying their gestures as tiny fragments of their conversation reach me through the glass, beneath the sounds of lively conversation and the thrum of some machine, emanating from the kitchen below. One of them, the one facing me, reminds me of someone. Perhaps this is why I study her the longest, as if without fear my attentions will be noticed. And as I do so her movements seem to slow, and for a second I swear that we make eye contact. Yet unflinching, she continues talking. And real or imagined, I read in her unheard words a signal.

I abandon the bar and head back into the restaurant but just as I'm about to climb the stairs and rejoin the party I feint right into a corridor towards the back of the restaurant. I pass the restrooms and a doorway marked marked *Personelle*. The drone is louder here, a cooling system or a dishwasher; I know only that it puts out a lot of heat. It rises to a pitch as I get closer. Where the corridor terminates, there lies my objective: an open doorway and a curtain of hanging chains marking the threshold to a courtyard. And none sees me pass.

The concrete underfoot is littered with cigarette butts and empty bottles of imported beers – overspill of the restaurant's secret, other life. Above the first storey is a recessed walkway with still

more doors to unseen quarters above. Between here and the sky, a filthy netting spans the vacuum, intended to keep out pigeons and manifestly failing. The foetid air feels closer even than the stifling upstairs from which I have come, and yet something elegantly medieval possesses this place, recalling some Sicilian cloister or the gloomy hollows of the great courts of Ravenna or Avignon. And I am not alone. I feel his presence even before I turn around to see the figure that leans rakishly against the wall. Then, with the boldness of a lord, the deftness of the jester, and the timeless inevitability of the assassin's blade, Sebastian steps forward to kiss me.

When you make an ally of guilt you do not change its nature, though it's tempting to interpret the feeling that way. In dislocation, the relationship you now share can take one of many forms, determined as they are by some quality of the person and their actions or beliefs. The common denominator remains, however, its inextricable bond to your soul, and a command on your actions and thoughts that can only be held at bay by an indefinite process of negation.

These words were mine. And yet they feel detached, anomalous. Like someone possessed, or talking in their sleep. Yet when I spoke them then, I possessed a clarity I've known only a few times in the decade since. It is the 9th day in June, and we are talking, Sebastian and I, as we sit in the high field near our old school. Or, rather, he is talking; I am mostly listening, weighing my words carefully, wondering if he can tell I'm nervous. This animated glibness is a thing rarely witnessed, though common to moments such as this. That is, when he's around me. I wonder at this, too. The subject is the winter he spent in residence at a music college outside Vienna: descriptions of ornate libraries and mountains and ecstatic derivae. All wonders paling in the presence of the olive-toned visage of a virtuoso student cellist with whom he partook of an indefinite sequence of carnal lessons under the gothic-arched windows of his town house apartment, in the Stygian grandeur of the old Jewish quarter.

Whatever details I might later question, for a blissful moment I confess this reverie consumes me. It is not to last. The horn blare of the train sounds from the tracks somewhere in the valley. Clarity accompanies a wave of visceral disgust as the gloaming phantasmagoria of old Europe dissolves in the stream of provinciality. The one in which I swam and Sebastian dipped toe. Yet I know, too, that more things bind us here than birth. For while Sebastian's fate seems to follow a course no more knowable than the eldritch energies that travel, weightless, the unseen firmament, he was also engaged in all but name to Camille.

I don't remind him of this. I don't need to. Now bored, I change the subject to one that better suits my temperament. "Why is it", I wonder aloud "that you trust me with this kind of information?" I turn to regard him, as I sense he may for the first time in recent memory be calculating in earnest, a sight I don't wish to miss. Though when he turned his head, preparing to speak, his familiar aloofness was back. So with all his pronouncements of this nature.

"I don't know – I suppose there's just some strange quality of innocence about you."

We laugh together, though the moment is abruptly altered as he hastens to append:

"You remind me of Miranda in that way"

And I hope my look of affected concern is not mistaken for the definite article. He seems pleased either way, though I sense the moment drifting. So I say something that risks passing for obvious:

"I thought you hated your sister."

His face breaks into a smile again, deceptively guileless;

"Yes, but I'm still happy for the pair of you".

I don't laugh, though this was objectively funnier than what I'd said. Yet something in the moment is altered, and I see a fragment of Sebastian's self-assurance fall away. At first subtle, it becomes at once self-evident when, in answer to nothing, he adds;

“Besides, she’s as much to lose in the telling as I”.

And, by implication, so had I.

Another night in Miranda’s chamber. I am leaning against the headboard looking down at her. A vision supine dishevelment. I had long understood her predilection for depthless shadow was no simple affect, but something in the nature of one who swims between worlds. Universes whose structures she intuits and rejects for want of caring, letting thoughts bubble to the surface and take shape on her lips without embarrassment or self-critique. Her brother’s sister indeed.

I often wondered what part this affinity had in what would be our respective damnation. But not tonight.

After wine and rare contraband brought back from her own foray to the continent, she is presently in the process of unpicking a mathematical problem some rogue holidaying in Bruges had posed to her. She’d seen through the bluff almost instantly, but in so doing had discerned a detail of a subtlety lost on the teller, and which neither intoxicant had done anything to loosen up. And so she chose analogy, letting slip, in the florid prose her brother had at one time also favoured, a series of cognitive objects that, taken in the sum and spirit of their parts, detailed the passionate affair she and Sebastian had engaged in one fateful August two years prior, when both had been at opposite ends of seventeen.

My surprise was perfect theatre, worthy of the Thespian Sebastian had once promised to the world. For Sebastian had, in fact, already enlightened me on this curious lacunae of the siblings’ storied persona, and under remarkably similar circumstances. I wondered then, not at their lack of concern for this information, but at the kind of man they saw in me to be its recipient. But not for long.

Back on the high street, then as now, the geography of the town seemed stratified and immutable in a way memory so rarely permits. I can see it still. Yet for all this certainty I could still not place the library. So instead I find it as I did once before, in pictures. Closing my eyes, I see the street, the stone steps cut into the bluff, the sundial at the centre of a poorly tended lawn; the courtyard, its rotting vegetation shrouding a silted fishpool. The rolling stacks careening in the deep. The desk I'd made my own by the window in the section labelled *Poetry*. Scenes framed in the portals of locked doors.

With them come words, words read in the pages of the many ancient books that line the walls. Words that I recall reading in one particular tome, across idle afternoons in the long months of Sebastian's absence. But when they came to me then, they were in Sebastian's voice. The one he reserved for the stage.

We'll make it a suicide in the eyes of everyone.

The pact we made shares a similar nature. An artful web of affect occluding a hard kernel of something real. While no configuration of its requisite parts can now invoke this chimera, it was one to which we both bore witness. How else can you account for what we did? Perhaps it is because it was not conceived in one singular instance, or chain of cause and effect – invoking just enough poetic distance to push it into the realms of the mythical. Like poetry, not a thing but a process, and an infinitude of outcomes through singular and immutable function. Morbid certainty, when it came, appeared like the friendly stranger who joins the party unseen. Choosing the perfect moment to politely uncloak.

The stranger is here now, camouflaged amid the *mise-en-scene* of another midnight colloquy of past things. The tall window is open to let in the temperate air from the sleeping street outside. A lamp on a bedside table, a distant bureau and book shelves, Sebastian somewhere to my back. An ashtray sits to my left, with the apparatus of some select narcotic; hashish or perhaps simply tobacco to pique the rigors of some other, more bracing substance. It is so very like another room in

that same ancestral home, and I wonder which of them was the scene of that other tryst two years prior.

This mental tableau is bound to no particular night, but one in an infinity of its kind. It recalls the chamber in Vienna in which he described to me the many furtive hours spent in refuge from the groves of academe with his musician lover. And here it was again, remade on England's protestant soil. And many more besides, the same unbroken thread of space-time: an infinity of heavy velvet. Though, in this iteration, the role of messenger is his.

Sebastian never did say the name of his erudite Viennese amor – if indeed he was a native, and not some interloper drifted in on the danube from Budapest or some other Carpathian exclave. It was premised alone, apparently enough, that he was brilliant in areas besides music. And so mythologised had he by then become, that when Sebastian saw fit to share the matter of his philosophy, I felt like a chaste soul awaiting the moment of rapture.

It's in her nature, after all, this betrothal to Thanatos. It's always been with her. Because it's in us, too, though we know how to defy it.

The vision Sebastian imparted to me, excitement burning the mask from him, was not so much a discourse as a paeon to distorted allegory in whose centre lay a conceit of dubious origin. Amid visions of heroes and their mythic undoing, amid men become gods become swans crossing the pillars of hercules, there lay a call: that humanity, like the oembryal starchild, must break its eggshell prison that is the world and achieve *something*. And here, I recall, his tone became a shade colder. He argued that our common humanity was both a necessary mechanism for the soul's survival and a yoke upon our greater reason. That things of incalculable grandeur were inconceivable so long as human compassion made them, the secrets of the universe become so much collateral to an overzealous superego. And he said that one act of singular defiance of that humanity – say, the breaking of a great taboo – was all it took to open oneself to the rest.

I said that he had already committed incest upon his sister – and my girlfriend – Miranda. He smiled in reply. Yet even in that moment I felt something breaking. For no sooner had I received this wisdom than my own began to subsume it. For was this not the substance of things he'd spoken of years prior? Teenage narcissism craving cathexis? While the strength of wanting it to be more had briefly stirred me like the motions of a forgotten song, I met disappointment with a rueful cheer. That was the moment I saw light penetrate the gloom through a crack in the shutters, and I began to see the night coming to a desultory conclusion. Something I could not permit.

I remember clearly, then, the sequence that averted this quiet redemption. I was contemplating how I, in my slumberous, drugged state might execute a competent departure when I realised the topic had moved on to something else. Specifically, something the musician had spoken of. It was an element of myth which Sebastian believed was a earlier manifestation of the philosophical schema he'd outlined these past nights. Though no doubt inspired by it, this was not an importation from his pretty scholar's homespun dictates, but rather a formulation of Sebastian's own formidable insight. It's source was from a poem cycle, one the musician was in the process of either writing or learning (I forget which) in a form adapted for strings. It concerned a creature of antiquity that took the form of a supernatural twin – a dark half of the *id* made flesh, whose visitation was an ill omen.

Though his late immersion in the Teutophone milieu might have readily suggested the name of Doppelganger, he was more drawn to the Hellenic, the Eidolon.

“What was it the philosopher said: Know thyself?” I was listening again. By now what revelation promised was no longer gifts of untrammelled reason, but palpable magic. And I wondered, were these elements innate to the poem, or the deceptions of darkly-willed inference? It no longer mattered. Taking leave of his better scrutiny upon the thread of some haunting four-part arrangement, Sebastian had long ceased to divine the difference. “Once you find your darker self”

he said, “or better yet, become him, what is to be done with the old?” I kissed him again, and asked if I really reminded him so much of his sister.

Yet even now I shudder at her name. Even as these scenes play out across an indifferent screen of disconnecting years, suspicions start to creep. For while our discussions took many winding paths, the endpoint, the act itself, was a design fully formed, in my mind, at least, at the moment of inception. Like a resolution made in some instance of childish rage, unjustly curtailed, allowed instead to fester, forgotten and in secret, through its own parasitical adolescence, until it is as it was then: a secondary organ of Sebastian’s precociously magnificent *becoming*.

We must make the agony double and not feign to blink. First her heart, then her life. Sweeter even than betrayal itself. And the rest we shall play ad libitum.

I think of Miranda, not that night though I know I must eventually. Despite all her truly murcurial powers of deduction, the extent of my treachery was not a truth she may never have come to on her own. Perhaps this is because its nature was beyond even the conspiratorial bond between Sebastian and myself. A secret understanding between me, God, and the faceless archons of the county library.

What we’re doing is not defying it – it is more and less.

I’ve been to Vienna in dreams – yes, mine!

See how the flame distorts in steel – is it not a mirror?

I’ll write of this one day – And you’ll set it to music. It’ll be our confession, but only those of our kind will hear.

Now let me kiss you.

You told me that, remember?

Now go.

It is night, and I am back at the house. I gently check the door is still locked before extinguishing the light. Outside in the hot darkness, her choked sobs have fallen to a gentle cadence, undercurrent to the sussurations of unseen trees beyond the window above. Then a sound, the turn of a key and drawing of the latch, a few words of confusion rising to panic as if she knows her death is behind that door before she even knows whose form it takes. Then a scream, a crash, some unspecified commotion, and a single, muffled gasp that stretches to eternity.

But the scene I enter defies every meticulous plan and erudite precaution of our fevered rumination. It seems that, in spite of our suppositions, Miranda knew her death had come, and in her final moments refused it. Pushing her brother back, she'd made for the window, as if daring the glass and the fall for a chance at survival. But tangled in the sheets she'd fallen off the high mattress, knocking over her bedside table and pulling the heavy velvet drapes down over her fluttering limbs. Recovering, Sebastian had mimicked her motion, descending upon the writhing mass of cloth and sister, stabbing like the lust-crazed savage who kills and then all of a sudden freezes, and standing, looks down upon what he has wrought with a curious detachment that defeats all feeling. That is how I found him as I crossed that cursed threshold.

These next things I see through eyes that are not my own. The drapes ripped from their holdings, moonlight floods the room. And there *I* am - a creature of dark blue and pale grey, joining the killer from stage right. Sebastian, is beauty and violence, adorned in great swatches of common blood that appear quite black. Beneath him, Miranda's body is an unrecognisable strip of ruined flesh, like a desecrated ragdoll or deflated wineskin: a pliable contortion of suffering, a machine run its course. Sebastian does not remove his gaze from this abstraction of girlhood as I see myself approach and, wordlessly, kiss him on the cheek, my lips blackened in their turn as I pull away.

Distortions multiply, and everything that was sealed with the leaden finality of death is suddenly fractured – futures swapped out like cards. I am saying his name as if he's forgotten it, my

voice a torpid whisper. The knife, still in hand, appears part of him now, and just as useless as any other.

Now back in my own remembered vantage, I watch his broken, mindless apparition crawl backwards across the ruined bed where I pin him, and kiss him, and act out the lines of our dramaturgy, playing both parts like I might still reignite the lust that fired appetites besides which only incest and my own cruel counterpart could satiate. Time spirals in the monologue. It is only when my tongue begins to catch, drily, in my throat that I pause at yet another realisation.

Sebastian is dead – all the life that had once animated his beautiful, vulpine features now flown, he slumps in my arms. His angel lust subsiding, the blade standing true. Faced with a choice between spiritual self-annihilation and a future locked into mutual depravity with me, he had chosen death, finding it preferable to reason's squandered benedictions.

Yet even as my breath contaminates the scene, I see my Byzantine designs for exoneration becoming now much simpler. Yet, still a nameless fear persists. For while I was the only living soul left in that house of desecrated lineage, their departure reveals another presence. A friendly stranger, lately uncloaked. For had I not heard Miranda say something? Mere moments *before* the assassin's key was heard in the latch. And am I not saying something I did not until this moment recall? And is there not a figure, standing where for that phantasmal instance I seemed to have stood? And does he not seem familiar, possessing a name other than that of *Guilt*?

Of all the questions sprung from that single source, I find myself asking the one whose answer I already know. *Why*?

The figure, when he finally deemed to speak, did so with a voice coldly mocking, yet in its own way, unspeakably earnest. And what it said has stayed with me even though I have some forgotten all but the words themselves. For they were ones I had, until this very moment, believed to be my soul's own poem; written in the language of stars, before I ever became a person to embody them.

It really happened.

These last stuttering images manifest in sequence. Miranda and Sebastian in chimaeric mutilation. Death-made the twins for which they were so often mistaken in life. A flight across kitchen tiles, invoking an imagined scene of a parent returning unexpectedly, their geniality – overflowing in spite of their surprise – stinging like nitre. A phone on the countertop exploding into discordant song. The hallway; austere wooden furniture on hard tile floor, umbrellas and overcoats battered and resplendent. Spiral staircase in Damoclesian descent. The open door, and dawn’s excoriating eye. I see the moss-fringed steps rising to meet me amid ramparts of privet, and my frantic figure, once again through guilt’s gaze, careening the quiet street.

The library doorway brings me through to a foyer full of breathless warmth and pervasive hush. The clerk desk is empty, shutters down over the window of the door marked “Librarians” and a sign that reads “Holding Conference - do not disturb”. The rolling stacks rumble in the deep, their presence known to me through minute vibrations in the parquet. I search the corridors for the next component of my designs: the *catalogue*, that I find it in an recess off the central atrium. Flitting through the file cards the voice of Etienne returns again unbidden. He tells me to seek out *The Book of Dead Names*. Reminds me that I’ll find it at the convergence of its form and subject, ones I will know instinctually. I push the drawer closed and look for the one whose paper label reads, in the librarian’s delicate script: *Classics – Etruscan, Roman, Greek*. Poetry lies back east. But what I recall in fact is not epic verse but a kind of closet drama, elegaic principles set in dialogue, to be recited rather than performed. The card is faded, but author, translator, classmark and year are emblazoned upon my mind as I make my way through the silent corridor to the final room on the left. There, atop a wooden step ladder I trace the spines until my finger alights on a hardback volume bound in ragged cloth of faded crimson. Fragments of gold leaf in the suggestion of letters are all that remain of its title, but the label is indelible, eternal.

I place the book gently on the table, its soft green leather yields hungry. Outside the window, the world is growing darker. The spine splits with a cartilegial pop, but the threadwork holds as the pages fall open on its one hundred and ninetieth. The third canto begins as an invocation to an obscure muse of Genoa. I read the pages, turning them gently for they are foxed and brittle, as it threads together a story; a brother and sister whose crime was too pure for their world to conscience, and so were both of them murdered upon a forest glade. Their destroyers were not the poet-slaying Bacchae but the cold arbiters of material law, taking their business into the fickle woods as if to judge a thing too unspeakable for the common populace.

And so I read the pages, and then re-read them, halting over the final lines like there is something missing. Like there was context that should have been known to me and was not. And I look at them now – their fraying, asymmetric rhyming scheme, the tauntingly alien metre. As they disclose their contents, it brings with it the realisation that I did not forget, but rather never understood enough to commit their contents to memory. And it brings a strange kind of comfort – that this story is not ended. But this opening of possibilities carries its own unease. For in the absolute certainty of my humanity, so confirmed in the remorse I felt, itself the upheaval of a ‘til then equal conviction of my immunity in the face of other, greater things, I wonder what in all that time happened to my guilt?

Take a name, or add another. Its owner has naught left to care. The words of my nemesis.

I return to the clerk’s desk, and the suffocating foyer. The librarians remain in conference, in perpetuity and prefect secret. Though I still hide the book as I pass their vacant throne. But then I hesitate. While the adolescent crusade against eternity succeeded only in destroying a family line dearer to me than blood, whatever gods watched over that house were evidently powerless beyond its walls. For the gods of the county library, I reckon with greater caution. Protocols are to be observed: I take the circulation file from the draw and, setting it down, follow the weathered ribbon to the final entry. The date stamp is heavy with the weight of a loaded weapon, the certainty of lead.

Yet when I press the stamp firmly down upon the card in the front of *The Book of Dead Names*, I still check to see if it worked. And freeze at what I see.

In the hundred years (at least) the book has occupied a place in the this library, it has been withdrawn all of four times; they fall in sporadic decades corresponding – I fancy – to some sine system whose intimations of formula are troubling to consider. And yet, on the nineteenth of August 1998 it appears to have been withdrawn twice. Tracing my finger across the grid, I look to see a name.

A tunnel swallows hungrily the rattling carriage, terminating my reverie. Beyond the window, the countryside is losing mystery. These woods and outlands of lost industry are another poem, one to which I know every stuttering beat. These are ever and always the first witnesses to my guilt. Like the passing state of the paranoiac dreamer, the scenery and its attendant logics are fading slowly. And yet, my part in the drama now played out does not follow them in dissolution. For that grows only stronger, taking the shape of its waking counterpart, whose nature I can no longer deny. For in that moment I knew my guilt and I were one and the same being. That moment I saw, written in my own script and dated 19:08:1998 the name of my nemesis: *Etienne*.