

"DON'T FOLLOW THE RADIO"



OTHERLAND

BY ELOISA GOMEZ



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*Sometimes our mind falls down rabbit holes, and it's
hard to find your way back out...*





To my classmates and my professor, for inspiring me to believe in myself





A chapbook project for a college creative writing class, **OTHERLAND** is a collection of non-linear vignettes telling the story of a girl who ends up in a world much darker than our own. Inspired by the writing RPG "Follow Me in the Night," by LAIKA's film, "Coraline," by Eve's song, "How to Eat Life," and NILFRUIT's Song "Wozwald", this world is meant to be a reflection of things that people keep hidden and the journey they must take every time old memories resurface and every time those dark memories are let go.

CONTENT WARNING: This chapbook touches on sensitive topics such self harm, abuse, suicide, and more. If you or a loved one are in a difficult situation please seek help and remember you are not alone.



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Idonia Dariens

Rain pours down like a waterfall, a torrent of the sky's sorrow and wrath, as I walked back home. The streets were empty with the lamps flickering in orange hue as the only source of light. Windows were barred and the moon equally remained hidden behind dark ashen clouds. While most people would have run or sought shelter in nearby stores, I simply walked; trudging through streams and puddles of water. My black hoodie was slick enough to defend most of my body against the storm but I didn't care for that, I just made sure the hoodie was pulled over my head to protect my headphones.

Tapping on my phone, I scrolled through various apps in search of music. Ignoring the red numbers of unread notifications and messages all throughout. Finally finding it, I motioned my thumb to click it but paused, noticing an... unfamiliar app right next to it. The little block had a gothic looking radio on it and following my curiosity, I clicked it.

Static filled my ears as I clawed at my headphones to stop the high pitch noise. Throwing them down, the sound remained in my ears as my phone glitched. I started to run, splashing water and pushing through the rain. Out of the corner of my eye I see the gleam of metal coming from the same looking radio perched on a windowsill as the static howled and whined. Turning sharp to the next street, the rain stops and the static is gone.

It's a gloriously sunny day, and it felt so wrong.

Canary Song

Only moments before the evening sky opened into a torrential downpour, but suddenly the sky was bright and sunny, even the birds were singing.

But the singing sounded... wrong. Harsh and electrical. Turning to the nearby houses they were colorful with white picket fences and cute little dog houses. Yet out in the middle of the street was the radio, the knob turning and shifting as it picked the right frequency.

“W-who’s there? What is thi-”

And then it started playing a song...

*“Feed me promises, keep my heart well
I’ll sing you songs until the darkness does recede
But if in the end I lose my voice
Will you forget about your love for me?”¹*

Canaries fell from midair, from the trees they were perched on. Their bodies twitching and their necks twisted.

I screamed.

Coal colored ichor dripped from their beaks and it seemed like there was no blood for them to bleed except for the same dark muck. My stomach churns as the song echoes and rings in my ears, not in familiar bird chirps but in the static lyrics of the radio. The chorus sings, long and somber, filling my ears and piercing my head.

“STOP IT!” I scream, covering my ears in vain.

I can’t take it, I need to run.

Turning, my foot catches

But I don’t hit the ground, I just keep falling.

¹ Canary in a Coal Mine by The Crane Wives

Welcome to Otherland

Falling, falling, and more falling. I tumbled and crashed into chipped stone ground.

Looking up, the once empty street was filled with people. Their expressions obscured by shadow and their eyes distant. The sky and buildings were monochrome and the moon shining above was shattered, fractured into so many pieces.

“Hello? Where am I?” I asked, but no one answered, nor did they look at me.

The radio spat out more static before I heard an unfamiliar voice whisper in my ear,

“Welcome to Otherland.”

Another song plays, the lyrics fast and confusing. Overlapping again and again like the overstimulating chatter of the crowd.

*“Two truths and one lie, the time flies as madness descends
What begins and what ends
Who am I, who are you?
What's a lie, what is true?
How do you find a way out
When what's left appears right and what's right's always wrong?
Clinging to sanity or embrace the fantasy?”²*

Bodies bumped into each other, eyes cold and glaring as they all slowly but surely honed in on me. Pushing myself up, I rush into the crowd, escaping the glares. But... wait... Every step I take is followed by another; soft but thudding footsteps behind me. I'm afraid to meet other eyes, but I know *something* is following me.

The street is unreasonably long with no forks or divides. The same houses line the edges and no cars in sight. Every person looks the same too, shadowy outlines of humans, but the thing following me seems... familiar. The pounding in my heart recognizes them; like a prey remembering the predator that once hunted them.

I sprint further down the street and deeper into darkness.

² I Only Paint in Red Now by Lydia the Bard, Tony Halliwell

Emotional Baggage

It's like my house... but not. Everything is the same but muted; quiet with faded colors. Locking the door I go into my room and search for a bag, a backpack, anything to carry supplies in. I found my old school backpack and turned it upside down, letting everything spill out onto the dusty ashen rug. Books, binders, dead highlighters and chewed pencils scattered all over with crumpled pages of paper. One wrinkled page was... colored... It was different from this monochrome world.

I picked it up and unfolded it, seeing a familiar set of handwriting. It was... nostalgic as a fluttering feeling filled my chest. Time may have smudged the message beyond repair, nor do I remember the person who wrote this... but whatever clouded this memory faded, just a bit. Like a single ray of sunlight on a cloudy day.

I grabbed the backpack and filled it with some bandages, spare cash, and a bruised apple. Heading back out the door, I looked at the crumbled paper and let it go with the wind.

“You have to let go to survive...”

Dollhouse - CW

I run into a building, shutting the door behind me. Looking around, I notice the inside resembles a picturesque family home, but something feels... so eerily wrong. The radio hums again, sitting atop of the fireplace. Looking down at my body I see porcelain limbs with cracks and fractures. The radio starts to sing again;

*"Places, places, get in your places
"Throw on your dress and put on your doll faces"
Everyone thinks that we're perfect
Please don't let them look through the curtains
Picture, picture, smile for the picture
"Pose with your brother, won't you be a good sister?"
Everyone thinks that we're perfect
Please don't let them look through the curtains"*³

I run through the rooms, seeing broken body parts and trails of porcelain dust. The photos on the wall show a happy family, but their faces are crossed out. Like an angry child scribbled on them with a black marker during a temper tantrum.

But as the song played, the house... flickered.

The trails of dust flashed into drops of blood. The steaming food on the table became rotting in one moment with empty alcohol bottles scattered around. A bitter metallic taste flooded my mouth, reflecting unsettling memories resurfacing. The cracks on my body flickered, getting replaced with black smudges, like I was turning to shadow. My ears ring with echoes of the song and the metallic flavor splutters out in coughs. The blood dripping down my chin was a muted red with hints of black.

A loud, harsh banging resonated throughout all the doors. Like someone was trying to break through. The walls grew taller and taller as the ceiling became higher and higher. Turning back, I rush to the door, but no matter how fast I run it never gets any closer.

In the corner of my eye, I see a bit of a broken arm. A doll my size was shattered as tears fell down its cracked cheeks.

It looked like me.

³ Dollhouse by Melanie Martinez

Shattered Reflection

I stared at the smudged, lipstick stained bathroom mirror; tracing over my arms and face, now devoid of cracks. It was the mirror itself that held such fractures, showing a split version of my face. Stark pale, with inky smudges trailing up my right side towards my eye. Normally I had eyes that reminded me of falling rain, but my right eye, tainted by the shadows, turned gold with a black sclera. I drew my hand through my short wavy hair; but even that shade started to become muted. From an oily black to a faded grey, like an old cartoon character going out of season.

Turning the faucet on, I splashed water on the shadowy smudges; rubbing them harshly to remove the dark stains. Checking my progress in the mirror, I noticed it became... foggy, with trails of steam curling over the fractures. I went to wipe the vapor away only to quickly recoil with a hiss, my hand marred with crackles of red boils like I touched fire.

Then, *it* appeared.

Bursting through the mirror without so much as a shard of glass breaking. A dark reflection of myself came halfway through. Eyes opened and closed all throughout her body but the two eyes on her face were golden... like the one on my right side. A clawed inky hand grasped my throat as it smiled; ear to ear with jagged teeth. The crackles of the radio composed it's voice as it spoke in song:

*“You’re at the bottom of your life now, so you want to grieve, right?
A convenient heaven’s net doesn’t exist.
It’s established. Slavery, slavery...
Okay, okay. This is fate.
The obstinate fools spit those words out.
There’s no love there. Is there no love?
She was screaming. The velvet rope was torn.”⁴*

With that last line, it dragged me through the mirror. Taking me deeper into this twisted world.

⁴ Kilmer - Original Ver. by NILFRUITS

Artificial Happiness - CW

I've been running for so long before I collapsed in this alleyway.

My body sank down, weighted by exhaustion, by the dark feelings this world sparks in me. My mind was numb. Hazy, as if the shadows crawling on my skin wormed their way inside me. I've been wandering for hours, days, I wasn't even sure. There was no time here, no day nor night. Just eternal twilight. The static of the radio hummed continuously in my ears, nonstop, becoming like white noise in a world of black.

It reminded me of earlier parts of my life.

When I drowned my sorrows with burning liquor, stolen from cupboards.

When I breathed in toxic smoke just to feel the thrill, contrasting this dull life.

When I drew scars on my body just to remind myself that I was still here.

Through the murkiness of my mind, I heard the faint sound of footsteps approaching the alleyway. Distant, but it brought me back to the roughness of the wall, the chipped bricks on my back, to the buzzing of flies swarming around trash, to the puddles of inky black ichor rippling by my feet.

Then, right in front of me, was a hunched, cloaked figure who gave a smile. They extended a spindly hand, clawed and black, offering a small bottle of purple pills that looked like fruits and cherries, apples and blueberries, but not quite. I wanted to take them, follow the static of the radio. But I can't. I shouldn't. Their voice, buzzing like the flies, synced with the radio's lyrics;

*“Tiny red pills in a big blue bottle
Wish I had the strength back then
Need to get a refill, chase away the evil
All the whispers in my head”⁵*

Surrendering to the radio, I raised my hand and took the bottle.

⁵ Six Pills by Rosendale

A Memory of Scarlet - CW

Thin streams of scarlet rivers ran down my knee, bright and colorful against ashening skin. Even through the pain of torn flesh, cut by the crackled concrete of the street, the bleeding colors gave me hope. Tearing through my jeans, I widened the rips caused from my fall and brushed off the fragments of stone from the wound. More blood dripped down, holding some beads of black ichor. A mix of blood and ink brought back memories of old...

“Why did you get a tattoo on your scars?”

The figure, face obscured by fragmented memory, smiled as they wore the scars and ink on their sleeve with pride. Horizontal lines etched on their arm rose up to the markings of a heart mixed with a semicolon. The ink rose up and down, up and down from there forming a bracelet of heart monitor waves.

“To show that despite all the blood I shed, despite how much I was in pain; I didn’t give up. This isn’t the end of my story, the blood I shed was only ink I can use to write new pages.”

The wisps of memory faded with that as I brought my attention back to my bleeding knee. Rummaging through my bag, I pulled out a scrap of bandage wrappings and bound up my wound; and with it the reminder of that moment in time.

Two Wolves

I finally reached the outskirts of the city. The never ending twists and turns of streets and the multitude of identical houses finally started to fade as the road stretched towards the lights of an amusement park. Even now, I could still hear the hum of the radio, mimicking the sounds of city life in a hollow echo. No matter how much I run, the static humming won't go away... I know that now.

Then suddenly, it stopped. The noise of car alarms, of the chorus of footsteps, it just stopped. In its place was a new, foreign sound.

Howling.

Clear howling, further away from the city towards the park. Drawn to it, I start to run in its direction. Muffled voices filled my head, warning me. They spoke rushed and panicked, overlapping each other. But I ignored them and went closer and closer to the howls.

And there, in the clearing with locks of golden fur was a wolf, eyes crimson and piercing.

The radio spurs back to life, trying to catch my attention again. It plays another song, it's static, harsh and desperate.

*"I've thrown out my life, I'll give it away
If you really love me, then tell me you're okay
I'll be the bandage on scars that we made
And leave you alone as our memories fade
They fade, they fade"*⁶

It finally feels calm in this hellish world. This Otherland. The radio rings in my ears, its lyrics taunting me. But I tune it out, only focusing on the final lyrics. Letting it... fade away. The wolf lets out another howl, overpowering the remainder of the song. In confidence, I howl back. A new song is then made between the two of us as we howl towards the starless sky.

And the radio finally shuts up for once.

⁶ Sara by Altessa

Sing Your Song in Silence - CW

“What are you doing here?”

To my shock and surprise, a shadow addressed me, *saw* me. Their figure was so obscured by charcoal smoke that I could not recognize them, but their voice brought back fragments of memory. Perhaps it brought back some of theirs too when they slowly and shakily reached their hand out in disbelief towards me.

“Idonia?”

My name. The moment they said my name, some color returned to them. A ripple in the air returning them to how they were and what they’ve become all at once.

Drenched in murky water with bright red flowers blooming from their wrists.

“How did you get here?” I asked, my voice quivering.

“I ran away too much. I forgot about what I had, the people who loved me.” They tried to say, an insistent buzzing devouring their voice.

When they noticed this they began clawing at their head, as if the buzzing came from within. “NO!!!” They screeched, sounding like the whining feedback of a microphone.

Rushing forward they grabbed me by the shoulders before I could dodge, hands trembling.

“You can’t trust it! It made me feel safe, but I forgot about everything! I gave up, I gave up, YOU CAN’T GIVE UP!”

“I can’t hear you! What are you saying?!”

A scream filled the air, morphing and shifting into the hum of the radio. The shadow’s body became glitched and splintered into monochromatic shapes as it sang;

*“Oh, ashes, ashes, dust to dust
The devil's after both of us
Ooh, lay my curses out to rest
Make a mercy out of me”⁷*

⁷ Curses by The Crane Wives

Shattered Reflection: Reprise

I find myself in another bathroom, needing to wash off the blood and grime from my body. Turning on the faucet, the silvery water ran down with a hiss and a squeak. Putting my hands together I lather up with the soap but the darkness on my hands will not wash out. My fingers have stained black like I dipped my hand into ebony paint and no amount of washing will clean it out.

With a sigh, I give up and instead lean my head down to wash my face. Cool water runs down my cheeks, washing away the salty remnants of tears and dirt. Taking a deep breath I look back up to the mirror and—

The radio plays again and my reflection comes back to life. Lunging forth it grabs the collar of my hoodie, pulling me off my feet my inches off the ground and grinning ear to ear. It's voice singing another song, a familiar static in the lyrics;

*“Let’s play our hearts out ‘till we drop dead.”
Future murder buds.
They grovel and hold back their tears
but glare, knowing nobody will come.
Maybe there was no consolation to begin with.
They brought that wheezing on themselves.
They fiercely gripped a helping hand.
Safety disappears, and the curtain rises.”⁸*

I grit my teeth and curl my fist as my reflection seems delighted; excited even at another chance to torment me. But its face turns to pure terror when my fist slams a punch onto the glass, shattering it as it screams.

The radio cuts off and it is silent again.

“I’ve learned your tricks.” I announce, letting the blood from my hand drip down onto the floor.

“And I’m getting out of here.”

⁸ Arandano by NILFRUITS

Vocal Daggers

I continue to wander the streets, pushing past crowds of shadowed people. I hear voices ringing in my ears... shouting at me angrily. Every cry brings the visions of fists, of pain, of tears and blood. Clamping my hands to my ears I start to run as the shouts grow louder and louder and I feel smaller and smaller. I need to get away, I need to *run*. But the voices are coming from everywhere, all around me.

The radio sits in the distance on an iron box, oddly quiet with a low hum of static.

I couldn't take the shouts anymore, I couldn't bear to remember so I reached for the radio and turned the knob all the way up.

It happily began to sing, drowning out the memories.

*“I will poison all your happy thoughts
I love you like the ashes in my cigarette box
And if you're fine with that
You can be mine
If you're fine with that
You can be mine”⁹*

I curled up in front of the radio, letting the lyrics drown out the shouts. I could feel the stares of the crowd, feel my shadow cling to me crawling around my skin.

All I could do in this moment though was follow the tune of the radio and let it consume me.

⁹ Tongues & Teeth by The Crane Wives

sLAUGHTER

I catch my breath; leaning against the rusty bleachers inside the curtained tent of a circus. Dull reds and muted whites rose high up, matching with the swings from trapeze and ribbons of silk dancers. The radio sang its song as shadows watched the ongoing performance, silent and stagnant. The performers wore bracelets resembling chains, clanging together like broken bells, and veils covered their faces.

*“It's a Sin Circus and we're just the cast
While we fall down, everyone has a laugh
No one ever leaves, 'cause we just wanna make believe
It's a Sin Circus and we're just the cast”¹⁰*

Their performance stayed within the confines of the tent. Everytime they neared the edge leading towards the exit, an invisible force pulled them back into a perpetual dance. Even there the veils I can see tears dripping down their faces as they dance for a phantasmal audience. Cheers echo in whispers, like the fake sounds of laughter on a tv show. It resonates with me, my mind mulling over the repeating lyrics. When I feel a growing weight on my wrist I know I couldn't stay, otherwise I might end up joining them.

I grieve for the performers as I leave the tent.

¹⁰ Sin Circus by Unlike Pluto

Escapism - CW

“Why am I here?”

They’ve all come to ask,
Stumbling into this ~~OTHERLAND~~.

Following the static ringing in their ears,

Following the song of ~~escapism~~.

Life’s lost its meaning!

The world’s lost its hue!

So you paint your arms scarlet

To hide the bruises on your soul.

See? Others are happy,

To gaze on the pain of a haven’t met!

So sing songs of hatred,

force codes and ego

And depend on the ~~radio~~...

Succumb to familiar patterns,

When you can’t be cured by bottle, blade, or dose

Because answers can’t always be found in the dead of night.

Turn on the ~~radio~~

Let the songs take you away!

Escape to an ~~OTHERLAND~~.

There are many just like you.

With shadowy sins crawling on their skin.

So bite the fruit of life,

And seek an end where you’ll never ~~die~~

Drown Your Sorrows

The rumbling and clattering of voices and glass reverberate in the background. Folks chug down beer and wine like water as the bartender fills their glass right back up again. Subdued lights strobe the club, as bodies blend together in a twisted dance.

They say you can “drown” your sorrows; but the whiskey is making me do anything but forget. My glass is swiftly refilled as the bartender awaits acknowledgement, but I know deep down... I shouldn't lock eyes with anyone. Keep my head down, avoid those soulless eyes, eyes searching to devour anything that isn't dead inside. The radio sputters, taking form in DJ's table as an electric humm fills the air.

*“Dress me in red and throw your roses
And I'll wrangle the beasts with words
It's a graceless dance of epithets
We learn to make somewhat hurt
They will consume your sweet resistance
And they'll carry your heart in their teeth
But I am always feeding them
The ugliest parts of me”¹¹*

The air is thick with smoke, masking a deeper, more rancid smell that almost makes me gag. Hooded figures enter the club as the radio continues its song. They pass around bruised violet colored fruit that people hungrily gorge themselves with.

But through the static, brief, like a glitch in a video. I see what they really are...

I escape through the backdoor before they see me.

¹¹ Take Me to War (Live) by The Crane Wives

Likewise

The white noise of the radio has been ringing in my ears for hours. Taunting me, tempting me to turn its knob, to play a song. In defiance and desperation, I dig into my bag and pull out a broken set of headphones, connecting it to my phone. Looking from an app that hasn't been corrupted by the radio I quickly press a random song to play. But the radio knows and it's hiss and purr echo in the song, driving me mad. Something warm drips down my ears as I raise my hands up to take off the headphones.

Static echoes as the radio chokes and sputters.

*“Crazy” is, I believe, the medical term
When we wanna recover, but we don't wanna learn
Keep breaking what's been fixed a thousand times
And gimme some more of that iodine*

*I can't make reality connect
I push 'till I have nothing left
But if we want to wake up
Why we still singing these lullabies?”¹²*

I don't recognize this song as the lyrics overlap and overtake the old melody. I pull out my phone, cracked from the journey and look at the song currently playing. Then a chime, a new message, from an unknown number.

“You're here too?”

My jaw is hanging open as I stare at the screen. The text bubbles up as a new message follows suit.

“Can't stay long. It knows. But there's a way out.”

“How? Who are you?”

“Someone like you. Follow the howls and don't eat the purple fruit.”

¹² Iodine by Icon for Hire

Waterlogged

There's a faded leather journal in my bag, crinkled by water as ink bleeds through the pages. There has been no rain in this world so far, no sun, no weather. So how did this get here? Pulling it out, I turn to the first page. My name is scrawled in chicken scratch and smudged, but still legible.

"I thought I got rid of this years ago..."

Turning to the first entry, I read what hasn't been ruined by the water;

"I met with ~~ya~~ after school today. They seemed tired with dark circles under their eyes. I teased them about it and they sort of laughed before becoming serious. They kept having dreams, weird dreams. They dreamed about a "wonderland" filled with music and laughter. People ate delicious fruit, they were kind to each other, and it was only fun and games. A way to escape reality.

They seemed far away when they told me this. They were just staring at the radio playing in the diner."

I quickly turned the page, looking for more information but it was illegible. I kept flipping through it, looking for any other entry. Another passage in the middle of the journal;

"The more they kept having the dream the worse they looked. I haven't even seen them lately. They haven't been attending class. I heard they started smoking when things got really bad with their homelife. I hope they're alright and that they answer my messages."

I kept turning the pages until I reached the last entry. The worst looking one but still barely legible.

"They're gone... It's my fault. I should've been there for them more."

A sigh escaped my lips, a tear down my cheek.

"So you were here..."

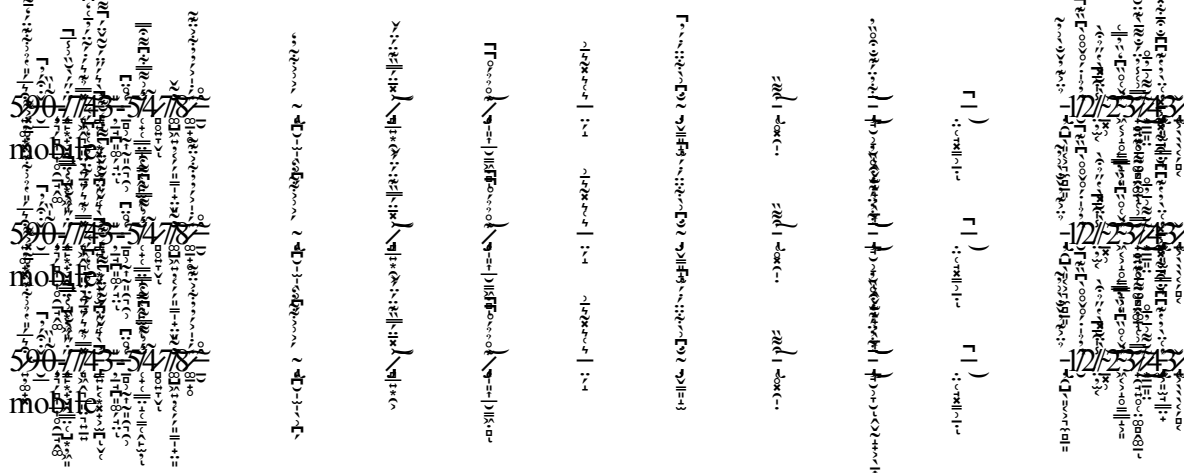
Message

A song, a chime; clear and bright. It held no corrupted static like from the radio but instead produced a vibration humming from my pocket. Pulling out my phone I tapped the cracked screen as it woke up with a glitched light.

Unknown Caller Answer Decline

I watch the blaring notification die as it switches to voicemail. Wondering how I even have a signal here, and who this, is I quickly rush to my voicemail.

“No no no no... Come back, come back.” I begged, trying to find the call.



It's full.

The same voicemail repeating over and over in a broken glitch. The number's familiar, as is the date. I click on it, letting the nostalgic voice wash over me.

“Hey, sorry I haven't had a chance to call or even just message. Life's been hell. Hope it hasn't been the same for you. Anyway, I just wanted to pass on something that really helped me; thought it might be good for you...”

I stop it. Tears dripping down my cheeks in inky streams. It was like this everytime I listened, this was the reason why I couldn't bring myself to delete it. The memories were too much. The pain echoing in my chest, rippled across my body.

And I deleted it. Letting them... go.

The static of the radio became just a bit more quiet.

Duality, Reality - CW

I see the shadow of someone I once knew. Just a brief image, the flicker of a memory.
Flashes of lost feelings, misinterpretations, misunderstandings.

A cafeteria, with spilled food and dripping clothes
A raging voice, followed by welts of red and purple
The blinding light of a screen, and the tune of the radio

I saw all this, and all I remembered was the parallel of who they were to me. Of what they've done.

Words of spite, spoken and written
Snickers and sneers of the like minded
The look of longing on the school roof

A cry for help?
Forced friendships?
Why didn't I see it?

The radio hums, much more somber than normal, as the memories continue to flash and merge.

“If your nonsense is just words that rob false views
The true form of revenge seemed to have seethed in the lungs, leading too
The life I'm living and relying on
Drunken with impulses I want to depend on
Even if I wear a disguise if there's a place where I belong and can be of use”¹³

I never knew who they truly were but perhaps... maybe, just maybe... The radio is giving me a glimpse of their “otherland.”

I blink, and they're gone.

So I let their name rest with the wind, one last time.

¹³ Fight Song by Eve

Devouring Shadows - CW

The shadows move with the people, but they're a person of their own. The radio hums in agreement but reveals a new truth. One of how to eat a life.

*“Do not try to look at the truth
Measuring the weight of life
In that wavering bonfire,
what did you see?”*

*Tonight, before tomorrow comes, sober up
You're running out of time”¹⁴*

The shadows devour one another, living and dying in a vicious cycle. Golden light bleeds from them, from their cores. Remnants of their heart are fought over and torn into glittering fractures of light. Bodies ripped apart with realistic gore; a puppet show of torn flesh and black blood.

Those who eat, *who feast*, look more human. The shadows fade from their body. A metaphor to how people claw and fight each other to simply... feel something?

They feed on the lives of others with harsh words. Hungry for love, for violence, hungry for *life*. Aside from those who hunt. I see those who give, those who rely. But in the end, we're all eaten.

They're clawing at my feet but I won't be devoured... not today. The radio cuts, and the shadows recede, hunting for another meal.

I don't blame them, because I also hunger for something I don't have.

¹⁴ How to Eat Life by Eve

Longing & Lament

A crumbling building held together by rotting wood and stranded in the middle of an empty lot. The windows are broken with jagged edges, the sign illegible and held up by a single rust eaten chain.

There was no one around, no sound of the crowd, no sign of light nor color.

Just echoing silence chasing a long forgotten memory.

The way this building is hollow, empty, forsaken reminds me of my own heart. Patched and boarded up, on its last legs; simply a memory of better times. I want to return to those times, when things were... happy. To the sound of laughter of joyful music, to the smell of apple pie, of cinnamon and sugar, to the warmth of hugs and good company. When the only pain was when you couldn't breath from the joy from stretching your face into a smile.

Why can't the radio sing me a happy song?

*“Oh, raven, won't you sing me a happy song?
Oh, raven, won't you sing me a happy song?
Scorpion sting, I don't wanna bleed, tell me that I'm not lost
Oh, raven, won't you sing me a happy song?”¹⁵*

The static hums in response. I know the happiness it offers is artificial. From the thrill of the clubs to the cursed amusement park. Happiness is drowning in pleasure, in materials. I don't need that, I don't want that.

Raising a hand up to touch it, the whole building crumbles to dust.

All that are left are splinters digging into my fingers.

¹⁵ Oh Raven (Sing Me a Happy Song) by Unlike Pluto

Temptation - CW

Empty rides, rotting food stalls, and the rancid smell of cigarettes.

This amusement park offers different definitions of “amusement” as streets are filled with muted neon lights advertising clubs and bars. Those who did hop on rides never left them, eternally stuck in a loop of “joy” where their feet never touch the ground again.

A clock chimes, echoing in deep notes as if from a clocktower. Everyone pauses, watching, waiting. Gazes droning on like bees dulled by sweet smoke.

From the shadows emerge a parade of clowns on stilts. Their leggings were frilled and ruffled and their colors weren't as muted as the rest of the world. Roaming, they handed out something before moving on. Painted masks twisted in perpetual smiles, growing wider as the radio announces their entrance.

*“All through your life you'll grow and die
Don't fret for all your funds each are set to the side
You'll raise an eye, until you rot with spite
Within the burning light that you say you should try
Such vivid grace, call out in vain
With lights just like a theme park all shining so bright
In time it seems love fades in greed
"I wonder can we live on without our beliefs?"¹⁶*

They're handing out apples, the same color as the pills from before. Without thinking, I took one; it's skin plump with perfect curves. Was this how Snow White felt when the old crone offered her the apple?

Against my better judgement I take a bite, but the rotten, bitter taste fills my mouth. I spit it right out, watching the apple crumble and turn into a moldy mush. Turning, I see someone else bite into the apple, swallowing the piece with vigor. Black ichor drips down their eyes and mouth as they smile before dropping dead.

I couldn't help but scream as necks snapped towards my direction and hungry eyes stared right into my soul.

¹⁶ Wozwald by Yuu Miyashita, NILFRUITS (English Cover by Will Stetson)

Lost One's Waltz

Threads of silver light weave into the silhouette of a doorway, glowing in the darkness of the alleyway. In the distance it shifts and shimmers, but solidifies the moment I approach it. Soft music is playing in the background, piano. Hand on the doorknob I slowly open it and step into a checkered ballroom floor.

Shadowed bodies dance in unison of different shapes and sizes. The radio commands them as the floor slowly begins to crack and split and the walls burn in fire. A haunting waltz in a burning room.

*"With beauty and disgrace, she grew into a mysterious flower
With malice in her veins, she danced to a song of power
"One, two, three, waltz with me, don't be afraid"
She held out her hand and he swiftly obeyed"*¹⁷

One dark figure extended a hand to me, offering me to join.

"Quick, take it."

I obey out of surprise to this... oddly familiar voice. Pulled into the ballroom, we dance over a broken floor, leading down to a pit of darkness. Their touch was gentle, reassuring, and nostalgic. When I get the courage to look at their face, I see the faintest glint of color in their eyes. They lean forward, their breath on my cheek.

"You shouldn't be here too long Idonia."

"This world will consume you."

With that they push me towards the door as the room is engulfed in fire and darkness. And in my hand is a small music player, bright and colorful.

¹⁷ Black Rose Waltz by Dysergy, Lizz Robinett

Last Song

The unsettling snap echoed through the air as every shadow turned to my direction. The sharp whine of static ringed through the air as the radio manifested itself several feet in front of me, its appearance looked glitched with black inky, ichor seeping out from its speakers. Another crack resonated as wood and metal bent and broke from the radio. Darkness from within the radio morphed into limbs, long and spindly and claws; the sections where wood splintered off formed jaws as more blackness pooled down like drool.

I stood there, frozen, before the Radio gave a roar, a mix of static chatter and broken songs.

Like a rabbit spurred by the sound of a gunshot, I ran as the Radio and OTHERLAND's denizens gave chase. The sheer amount of shadows following was enough to resemble a wave of ink and music.

*“Everything
Combines into one
So many flavors that one would abhor
And I know I've had enough, I've gone too far*

*Now that I've become a full-course identity
Take a bite of me
I hope that I've become a favorable delicacy
That I'm worth something*

*I'll eat 'em all, the thoughts of anyone I'll ever meet
Just to make them happy
Wondering why I'm a burden, or so it seems
Aren't I everything? ”*

This song vibrates all around, sparking tears of gold to bleed from my eyes and ears, the scar from OTHERLAND spreading further across my body. I can feel it crawling on my back. I kept running though, not sparing a second to ever look back. Crossing the circus tent, the themepark's gates, and the country road where I encountered the wolf. Soon, I ended up back in the city where the streets were eerily empty and it was just a straight shot back to where I first came into this world.

A hand grabs my ankle, causing me to tumble forward and scraping my skin on the pavement. I push myself back up, through the pain; but my bag has become far heavier than before. Swiftly, I pull out and open the bottle of pills and toss them on the ground. Several pause and scramble to pick them up, creating a small barricade of bodies. I let the rest go, dropping everything I've been carrying as I strive towards a glint of light in the distance.

A door, bright and colorful, lies ahead.

I throw myself against it, trying to pry it open. Arms flail around and grab my limbs, dragging me back but several actually reach for the door, trying to open it. Tears drip down my face as my headphones ring with a different tune, countering the hum of the Radio. The music player glows from my pocket, creating a rainbow that weaves around me just as the Radio brings a claw down.

*“Perfect things need to stay as
Perfect as they always were
If you can’t confront demise
Then live the life you don’t deserve
Since we’re bound to end up
Sad and back to being hurt
We should laugh with the
Friends we lack forever”¹⁸*

It stumbles back, hurt by the threads of life. Taking this chance, the charcoal limbs of shadows pull the door open and push me through as whispers of... hope fill my head. Turning back for the last time, I see them as they were before they became lost in this world.

And they smile for me.

I open my eyes to the soft blue of the sky and the scent of petrichor in the air. Warmth of the sun’s rays hit my face as I smile, happy to see life and color again. Birds sing, leaves rustle, and water drips down in nostalgic memory. Looking down at a puddle I see my reflection, clean of shadow, my limbs free of scraps.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it was just a horrible nightmare. But those scars still remain in my heart, never to be forgotten. The Radio is gone, it’s static no longer plagues my ears. But it’ll be back, it always comes back. Just as how OTHERLAND will always exist. But even if I get dragged back to that world, I now know that escape is possible.

Until then I will relish the colors and light of this world.

THE END

¹⁸ Appetite of a People Pleaser by GHOST & Hated by Life Itself by Iori Kanzaki (English cover by Oktavia)

Acknowledgements

The book is the product of how songs help me express myself. As someone who struggles with anxiety, depression and above all the fear of being a burden; the concept of telling someone how I feel is difficult. Songs do this for me, the lyrics say words I cannot and they inspire me to, in turn, write my own. My first thanks go to all the artists who have made the songs referenced in this chapbook. To the lyrics that resonate in my heart, to shedding the tears I couldn't shed myself. Thank you for helping me find my own door to escape my OTHERLAND.

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