

For some reason, I feel like mourning.

The light above me is far too cold to be the sun, although I feel as if I am in a desert. Were I to open my mouth, I am sure my tongue would crumble to nothing.

There is a faint sound of rushing, a slight hum, before I know it there is a woman in front of me.

She greets me and she sounds strange, garbled, filtered, I have never heard someone speak this way before. Her words are stilted with thought, constant hesitation, as if she's never had to speak before.

She wants to know things - things about home. Who ran the place, how much I paid for plates, where I got my clothes (the clothes I am not wearing). She wants to know if I worked for someone and what people did. She is disappointed to know I cannot read very well.

I am married, I tell her. I have two children. We live in a small house, we make our own plates, that's my job, I say. I sell the plates so we can eat. I don't know the governor's name, I cannot remember.

Can you vote? She asks. Do you struggle to construct sentences, have you been to school, were you always a potter? Have you had a patronage?

My favourite colour is red, my favourite weather is rain, I like to walk in the mountains, I like the feeling of clay under my fingers, the slip and slide of the mud as I mould it to my vision. My son's name is Rufus. I am thirty-two years old. I was born on the 11th of October. I say, I have a life, I am a person.

I ask where I am. I ask where they are.

She's impatient, that's not what she wants to know, she wants answers, she wants facts. She doesn't want me. We made a mistake, she says, we got the wrong man. We wanted someone better, someone who can answer these questions instead of wasting time. We have things we want to know. Do you know, she says, how much this cost? We don't care about your life, it's not important. It doesn't impact us, she says. But I loved it so deeply.

Where am I

She opens the wall, and I am falling. I am not falling, I am standing still, but dizzying down beneath me are spires and they're blurring yellow with fire. I can hear something down, far down at the bottom, colours blurring together in lines with the faintest sound of a rushing river. I must be on Olympus. Are you a god, I ask. No. She's a person like me, she wears strange clothes and talks badly. I am wearing strange clothes. These lights are not natural, no plant creates this colour. It's like walking into a garden where every statue is stripped bare of paint. Lifeless, bleak. It is not familiar.

I see her eyes soften, the line of her mouth growing slightly fainter. Suddenly she is not so severe, carved from stone, she is painted flesh.

Tell me about your family, she asks.

I tell her. I tell her how Rufus lost his first tooth at five years old, how Cilia followed her brother everywhere, how she is the one who takes after my love of pottery while Rufus wants to join the army, to be a centurion. I tell her about my wife, Poppea, who loves to watch the sunset and has beautiful, hard working hands, who takes time pinning her hair up every day and how I love to watch her braiding it, how we would go for walks together before the children were born and how I miss her so desperately that I feel starved of something I have no hope of tasting. I speak of my town, of my neighbours, of the baker who always gives us bread for less because I fixed his dishes, of the painting couple who decorated a politician's house and got rich, of the farmers all around who bring in produce and make the best wine, of the fishmongers who can gut a fish in one long swipe. I talk of the dogs that roam the streets, the cart-pulling donkeys, the pigs and the screaming goats and the birds that duck low between the roofs that are topped with reckless youths playing dice with one another. The shouts surround me again, the warmth of the sun strokes my hair, the bite of the wind pinks my cheeks and kisses my lips softly, a whisper on the breeze. The bright colours of the temple, the cobbled roads, that one stone that always turns your ankle, the scent of the sausages sold fresh from the stands that make the best snacks on a market day, the quiet bubble of the public fountains backdropped by the murmur of the shrine goers. The pealing of bells, the strumming of lyres and aulos whistle shrill and squawk of storytellers. My childrens' laughter as they chase the chickens and ride in carts. My wife's voice and the shimmer of light that twinkles from her brown eyes. The shattering of glass.

I know by now that I will not see them again. I can tell that something is off, that I am in the wrong place.

She is pitying. And she apologises. She brought me here, she says, she just wanted to know, she's the scholar, she gave the command, took me up from the dust, mere bone and ash, and gave me a new form, a twisted sculpture, stuck me up so high I couldn't leave. I ask to go home.

She obliges

I kneel in ruins, dust settling around my legs. I scabble at the dirt, it cakes my nails, surely, surely if I dig deep enough I'll find some cavern, some hole where they will be, surely, I think as I look up and see the two pillars that remain of the temple that I walked past every day, surely I can get them back. She watches, and I see her tears before I hear them. How did you go, she asks. I don't know, I don't know.

We lay on a hill together, another thing I did so often once the sun had fallen. She points up at the sky, there's Orion, she says. I cannot see it. It's so dark. Even the heavens, unchanging eternal, have been lost to me. You cannot see the stars here, I say. She smiles, it's bittersweet. Not anymore, she says. Those faint lights are all I have left - I see each as one of mine, each small spark is an eye of one I have lost. Slowly, I close my eyes to the sky, and pray that I may join them in the stagnant dust.