

After Four Breaths

The world splits at the edges. And I just let it.

I see it happening—not all at once, but in small increments, in the spaces between spaces. A bustling commotion of movement in my periphery: silhouettes that might be people, might be memories, might be nothing at all. The street flares, springs, stutters, like a half-burnt reel of film choking on itself. Everything is slightly off-center, as though reality has been tilted.

It started with you. Or rather, the absence of you.

They say grief always moves forward. A straight line. A beginning, a middle, an end. That's a lie. Time doesn't march forward, not here, it never really has. It doubles back, twisting and coiling, folding over itself; and traps me in dark rooms I thought I'd left behind.

I watch you leave over and over again.

You stand in my doorway, your shadow stretching long, as if the light forgot how to hold you. I don't dare blink.

I should have said something.

I should have asked you to stay.

But instead, I only watched.

I move through a world that no longer fits. My hands feel too small, my reflection completely unrecognisable. The sidewalk shifts beneath my feet, the buildings breathe—

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Four breaths at a time.

I count my steps, always four at a time. Four, then four, and then four again. The street dissolves into words—scrawled across the sky in a language I should know.

But do I?

I reach for you in the spaces, but all I ever touch is air.

The city pulses around me, the universe overflowing in my peripheral vision like a water bell bursting. Skyscrapers bend like melted wax, street lamps flicker.

Windows blink. Doors *whisper*.

And in the culverts, water rises, slowly, inescapably, a relentless, inexorable flood. It swallows street signs whole; curbs, the feet of strangers who don't seem to notice the world is sinking—

Should I warn them?

Would they even hear me?

I wonder if you ever really listened.

I wonder if you were always halfway out the door, even before you left.

The coffee shop on the corner has been closed for years, but the bell still chimes when I pass. Inside, people are frozen mid-laugh, mid-sip, mid-word. Their faces are blurred, smudged like almost-dry paint. I know them.

Or I did.

Or I will.

At the counter, you are waiting.

I know it's you by the way you leisurely look up, the way your fingers trace secret patterns on the table. I used to tease you about that—how you wrote invisible words with your fingertips when you were lost in thought. You told me you didn't even realize you were doing it.

I should say something.

I reach across the space between us, but my hands aren't mine anymore. Instead, I sit.

My coffee is cold.

You exhale, and the air quivers. Your voice is half-memory, half-dream.

I need to tell you that I've heard. The echoes. Yours. But when I open my mouth, the café flickers and vanishes.

And I am somewhere else entirely.

I stand in front of the home we used to share, although it no longer looks the same.
The windows, the rust-red bricks, the walls. I press the warmth of my palm against
the door, half-expecting the wood to shatter beneath my touch.

It doesn't.

Inside, the house walls remember us. They buzz with the ghosts of our laughter, the
spaces where our bodies used to be. The clock on the wall is stuck at 4:00. I don't
know if that means morning or afternoon. I don't know if it matters or not.

You told me once that time is just a little trick of perception. That the past isn't behind
us, but beside us, overlapping in layers too thin to see. You weren't wrong.

I close my eyes.

And when I open them again, I am standing at the ocean's edge.

The waves lick at my feet, swallowing footprints that never had the chance to set.
The horizon wavers, unsure of where to begin.

It's okay, I want to tell it. I'm not sure either.

I hear you before I see you. A whisper gliding on the wind, a long string unspoken.

My name, like a question, like an answer.

I pivot.

And you are there.

Or maybe you were always there.

Or maybe—

You still are.

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