

Biomorphic Medley

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Please note, this work includes content related to animal cruelty.

The sparrow lands above the freckle on my left knee.

No larger than an apple, the weight of the bird feels airbrushed against my skin. In the presence of its delicacy, my body suddenly feels monstrous and obnoxiously large. Beneath her talons I can feel my own blood flowing against my skin, thumping into the points of pressure in rhythm with the beating of my heart. And perhaps hers. I urge my heart to still, to quit the endless cycle of ebbing life into my limbs for only a moment so that I may be as still as the creature attached to me and not scare her away. I would die for a few seconds, I think, if it meant that she remained at ease. Her brown feathers glitter in the light, shimmering to reveal spots not unlike my own and wings tucked in neatly. With a small tilt of her head, her own black eyes meet mine and I devour the sight of them, searching in the black tepid things for a signal of consciousness. Does she like me? Does she know that I am breathing just as she is?

“Convincing, eh?”

And then she is gone. All that is left of the sparrow is a small imprint in my skin.

I agree the sparrow is beautiful, stretching my stiff neck and shuffling in the seat beneath me.

Quintin approaches me, his slender hands clasped enthusiastically in front of him. The sterile light beyond him renders his figure in a hazy silhouette, and I must blink repeatedly to register his

approach in clarity. He is a walking contradiction to the space around him: a long figure draped in black fabric that seems to be seeping from the pores of his skin and melting into the tile at his feet, void of personality or shape besides his gaunt face that is attempting to smile at me. I do not like his smile.

“Would you like to see the best part?” He asks, now standing above where I am seated. For a moment I consider rising to meet him, but he has positioned himself so that should I stand, we would simply crack our heads into each other and ruin this encounter. Quintin has made himself clear— I stay seated and submissive. And so, without waiting for my reply, he purses his dry lips and whistles a sweet tune.

The sound bounces off the four corners of the room we find ourselves in. The plaster walls and domed ceiling revert the whistle until it is insulating every crevice and digging uncomfortably into my eardrum. I’m not sure what is sharper— the whistle in my ear or the incandescent white color that covers all the surfaces just the same and burns my retinas. Suddenly I feel dizzy.

The sparrow returns, emerging from the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the chair beneath me. At the noise, it pokes its head out of the small cage on the pedestal across from where I sit and cautiously flies to the arm of Quintin. I consider the now-empty cage for a moment, wondering if I could break every limb and curl in every toe and

wrench my way inside.

“Vivianne. Eyes here.”

I turn to Quintin. With a beautiful flourish of his arms, he snatches the sparrow into one of his clamped hands and pulls something from his pocket. Distracted by the way his sleeves accentuate the movement and dances in the air behind him— I almost miss it. The tilt of the bird’s head, the quick drawing of the blade across its throat, at the small squeak whose echo manages to drown this entire lifeless room once again. A thin line of blood emerges, matting her feathers.

“Quite unconceivable, really.” Quintin says, holding the dead thing out for me. “Only the smallest amount of blood, and yet that is all that is needed to convince the world that her body once held life.”

My eyes begin to prickle, tears pooling in the bottom of my vision. I tell him it was cruel.

He rubs the blood between his fingers.



I must see Quintin every half-moon cycle. Or— “Bird-Man” – as I have begun to call him. Father insists I visit him in between piano and lunch. Though I protest the grotesque end, I do hold a secret admiration for my time with Bird-Man and the moment of wonder at what creature I will see that given day. The next is much bigger: an elegant beast with a long slender neck and powerful wings. Her presence is loud and dominant, and her death much more difficult. Bird-Man must hold this one down with the weight of his body and snap its neck with a great force before she stills and he is able to cut off her feathers and show me the real flesh and skin underneath. This lesson upsets me— my crying comes to no end and Bird-Man has to bring Father into the room to ease the tattered breaths that are violently pushing in and out of my lungs.

“Why do they die?” Father asks, his breath hot against my rosy cheeks as he kneels in front of me. I

ignore him, struggling to calm down.

He grabs my face, and for a fleeting moment the movement mirrors that of Bird-Man and I am afraid he will twist my head until my skin splits and poke at me for the next child to see. “Why do they die?” He asks again.

My response is automatic on my dry tongue: because they lived.

“Because they lived,” He echoes.

He stands, and my eyes stay locked on his face, swallowing the texture of his dark skin and movement of the sparse hair combed over his scalp. His uniform is so different from Bird-Man: a deep-blue cotton uniform that hugs him snugly. He does not simply float through space but looks like the particles of the air and dust and bird-feather remains have condensed to form such a solid shape. Father exhales, long and deliberate, and the air between us trembles. He presses his palm against the top of my head, as if feeling for a pulse beneath my hair. I can feel his fingers searching through my scalp, tugging lightly at the strands. For a moment I imagine he might peel them away entirely and discover the fragile bone of my skull beneath. But he only pats twice and stands.

“Time to go.”

And out of the white room we go.



The life in between my lessons with Bird-Man is hazy, as though the quality of life has been turned down and the ability of my eyes to render the world in front of me short-circuits, leaving long gaps and a wary sense of confusion. The hours do not stack neatly into days but instead smear together, like wet paint dragged across glass. Sometimes I find myself seated at the piano and cannot remember how I got there, or why the song beneath my hands sounds so familiar though I’ve never seen the sheet music. The rooms of the house trade places when I’m not looking – hallway becoming kitchen, kitchen

becoming corridor – until I stop trying to name them altogether. Even my body feels borrowed, like a prop left behind after a performance. When I press my palm to my chest, I swear I can feel the faint ticking of something mechanical where my heart should be, and I wonder if Bird-Man winds it for me while I sleep. Father has prescribed me pills to ease this.

Sometimes I am allotted time where the buzzing in my head stills, and I feel grounded once again. Without Bird-Man looming over me, it is a blessing. I know I play piano – and I become aware I am now sitting on a wooden stool, the wood warm under my skin and curved neatly to match my small body resting on it. My fingers hover above the keys, but they do not want to touch. The ivory looks like small bones arranged neatly in a row. When I press one, the sound that comes out is not a note but a low hum, deep and wet, as though coming from beneath the floorboards.

The next afternoon, at lunch, there is a feather in my teacup.

I find it curious and do not let it spoil the tea. This is all I remember, and then I am back with Bird-Man again.

When I report to him the oddities of my time in between, he paces around the room and when his chest is towards me, I can see his hollow face twisted in concerned thought. The fabric of his coat flutters faintly as if stirred by wind, though there is none. Each turn of his step seems to tug the air with it, pulling me forward and back again in a small tide.

“The boundary is thinning,” is all the explanation I am offered from Bird-Man.

The word boundary hangs there, invisible but tangible, like a thin film stretched tight across the room. I look for it, for the thing he names, but see only the reflection of myself in the polished tile: small, pale, seated. My reflection wavers, the shape of my head stretching in one direction, then another, as though my edges are unsure of where to end.

I ask if Father knows.

“Of your progress?” Bird-Man smiles softly. “Father knows of it all.”



When I return to my quarters that night, I find that my bed has been stripped of its sheets. The mattress glows faintly under the sterile light, and the smell of bleach stings my eyes. I lie down anyway. The ceiling above hums softly, but when my eyelids grow heavy and flutter closed the sound sharpens and I swear beneath it a faint pulse is echoing beneath the membrane that is the walls. At first, I think it is my own, but when I leave the room, I think it continues to beat without me.

In the morning, my hands smell faintly of metal.

Father summons me before breakfast. His office has no windows, only that same eternal white, and yet I feel the sense of morning there, as though time itself were pretending for his sake. He stands with his back to me, hands clasped behind him, looking up at nothing.

“Vivianne,” he says, and the syllables slide cleanly off his tongue, like something rehearsed. “Quintin tells me you’ve been troubled lately.”

A defensive urge bubbles up through my stomach, the sensation lingering on my fingertips and toes. I am not troubled, no. Just uncertain.

He turns then, and his eyes are kind. “Uncertainty is part of the process. To question is to feel. And to feel is progress.”

I nod, though I don’t understand. There’s that word again. The room hums here, too: that low, continuous sound beneath all others. It feels alive, as though it is breathing around us. Father gestures to a chair.

“Sit.”

I obey. The chair is cold and too small, as though made for a body that used to be mine.

“You’ve begun to perceive inconsistencies,” he tells me. “Your awareness is strong.”

I blink. Awareness of what?

“Yourself,” he answers simply. “The boundaries of what you are.”

He looks at me then, and I think I see a kind of affection in his gaze, or maybe pity. “Tell me,” He says, “when you see the birds die, what do you feel?”

I look at my hands. The faint smell of iron is still there, and I imagine it was my own fingers that strangled the sparrow and the swan. I do not like this thought.

“Good,” he says, smiling. “That means you’ve grown attached.”

He takes a small glass vial from his pocket and rolls it between his fingers. Inside is a clear liquid that catches the light in ways that make me dizzy. “Soon,” he says, “you’ll understand what we’re doing here.”



When I leave, the hallway seems longer than before. I count my steps, trying to keep rhythm, but the floor seems to shift beneath me, soft in some places and hard in others. A low ringing builds in my ears, and I think I can hear something behind the walls again, a steady whispering, understand.

That night, the whispering does not stop. It bleeds into my sleep until I am no longer sure whether I am dreaming or listening. I wake with the taste of dust on my tongue and the faint impression that someone has been sitting at the edge of my bed, watching. The indentation on the mattress remains, small and perfect, like the weight of a bird. The air feels close, too still, and I find myself counting my breaths, waiting for something to move that isn’t me. I think of Bird-Man’s eyes, how they dart when I speak too freely, and I imagine him behind the walls, taking notes.

When I see him again, he is quieter than usual. His hair is slicked flat to his head, his face drawn tight. The table beside him is covered with feathers, gray and white, arranged like petals around a hollow

center. There’s an odor in the room that makes me uneasy – warm and faintly sweet – and for a moment I think it might be coming from me. I approached the feathers, curious if Bird-Man had changed more birds down and plucked each one by one while they screeched and withered in protest.

“They molt,” he says softly. “They shed what they no longer need.”

I pick up one of the feathers. It is still warm, pliant at the base, and leaves a faint residue on my fingers that glitters when I lift them to the light. I ask if we molt, recalling the traces of feathers that seem to appear in my wake.

His head snaps up at that, his expression sharp. “Why would you ask that?”

The walls have stolen my heartbeat and the piano my bones and the birds my skin. I explain that I seem to be losing myself with each step, the solidity of my being crumbling away.

He does not answer. The silence sits between us like a living thing. The muscle beneath his left eye twitches once, violently, before he smooths it away with a fingertip. I am defending myself again, quickly reminding him that Father seems proud of my progression.

He gives a small, humorless laugh before turning away from me. “Father says many things.”

I watch him as he works. His hands move mechanically, tearing the remaining feathers into even smaller pieces. The sound is soft but deliberate, the quiet rhythm of destruction. I want to ask where the bird’s body is, what becomes of the creatures once they are perfect enough to die, but I am afraid of the answer. Instead, I ask how he knows that they are alive.

He pauses, his fingers hovering above the shredded down. “When they begin to fear death.”

The answer makes something in my chest flutter, an ache that feels both foreign and familiar. I think of the sparrow, of her soft brown wings, of the way I wanted to hold her heartbeat in my hands and

never let it go. By this logic, I must be alive too.

When I leave Bird-Man's chamber, the hallways have changed again. Where there was once a door, there is only a smooth wall, pale and seamless as skin. The light is lower now, a dull gray instead of white, and the air tastes sour. I run my hand along the wall as I walk, and for a moment I could swear it moves beneath my fingers, a slow, living shiver. I pull back quickly, but the warmth lingers on my palm as if something inside the wall has recognized me.

Back in my room, I try to play the piano, but the keys resist me. Each press of my fingers is slower than the last, as though the sound is dragging through mud before reaching my ears. The melody collapses in on itself, uneven and strange, yet I keep going, desperate for rhythm, for order. I press harder, willing it to make sense. When I look up, Father is standing in the doorway. I don't know how long he's been there.

"That song," he says. "Where did you learn it?"

He leaves without another word. I stare after him, the air vibrating faintly in his wake. The silence feels too heavy to be natural. Later, I stand in front of the mirror. My reflection is pale and flickering, the edges of my face melting into the glass. When I raise my hand, it lags behind, a second slower than me. I touch the surface and feel warmth, as if something on the other side is breathing. I whisper at her, asking if she is real. The mouth in the mirror moves with mine, perfectly synchronized, and yet I can't shake the feeling that she hesitates before answering.



In the morning, the mirrors are gone. The walls where they hung are now smooth and white, though faint outlines remain, ghostly rectangles of absence. I touch one of the shapes, tracing the edges, and the hum inside the wall deepens, responding to me like an echo. When I pull my hand away, my fingertips glow faintly, a soft pulse that fades as I blink. I hide

them behind my back, afraid Father will see.

Bird-Man does not come that day. His absence makes the air heavy, as though the building itself is holding its breath. After a time of waiting, I decide is long enough, I remove myself from my usual seat and say goodbye to the white room. I do not enjoy the emptiness, and I feel like a victim waiting alone in its four walls. Instead, I wander through the corridors, but each turn folds back on itself until I end where I began. The lights hum louder here, bright and unforgiving. When I stop walking, the sound continues to move, filling the space where footsteps should be. I think of what he said that Father hears everything, and the thought makes me dizzy. I press my palms against my ears and hum back at the walls until I can no longer tell which voice is mine.

When Father appears, it is without sound. He stands at the far end of the corridor, his face calm, his eyes reflecting the light so precisely they seem made of glass. "You've been wandering," he says. "You shouldn't."

I think I want to see the sky. To remember what it looks like.

He tilts his head, studying me as though I have said something incorrect in a language I'm not supposed to know. "The sky is not part of your environment," he says. "It would confuse the sequence."

I can remember it, vaguely: shimmering blue hues and a sickeningly large abyss.

He steps closer. "Memory is unreliable. It can mimic what it doesn't know."

His voice is too soft, too even. Behind him, the hallway shifts, the corners bending slightly inward, like the room is leaning to hear. Father stops a few feet away from me. The hum grows louder, vibrating through the floor and into my body. I can feel it beneath my skin, matching the rhythm of my pulse. "You ask too many questions," he says.

I am supposed to learn.

He looks at me for a long time, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. “Yes,” he says, “but some lessons end where they should.” He reaches into his coat and removes the same small vial I saw in his office some time ago.

The corridor hums louder now, so loud it feels like it’s inside my head. I can barely hear my own voice when I whimper at Father, afraid of what he will do.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he takes a slow step forward and cradles my face in his hands. Though my mind begins to race, my body submits and stills. Without a word, he slips his fingers into my mouth and opens my jaw for me. His other hand unclasps the vial and pours the liquid onto my tongue. “Be still, Vivianne.” He whispers.

The light swells in my vision immediately. For a brief moment I think I see Bird-Man at the end of the corridor, or maybe it is the sparrow, her feathers glittering faintly as she lands above the freckle on my knee. She looks at me once, head tilted, as

though she might say something if only I could listen faster. Then the light deepens, and she is gone.

My vision falters. The hum breaks into sharp clicking, a mechanical heartbeat stuttering out of rhythm. I feel it beneath my ribs, each pulse weaker than the last. He looks at me with something that might be regret, or only reflection.

“It isn’t failure,” he says. “It’s refinement.”

The floor softens beneath my feet. The white seeps upward, swallowing the walls, the ceiling, the air. I try to move, but my limbs feel weightless, hollowed of purpose. The sound in my chest fades until I cannot tell if it has stopped or if I’ve simply forgotten how to hear it.

Father stands over me, his face illuminated by the steady light of the device. “Rest now,” he says, almost kindly. “You die because you lived.”

The hum ceases. The air stills. Somewhere, beneath the surface of silence, I think I hear the faint flutter of wings.