

## ~Chairs~

Some brawling calamitous illness has taken up residence in the back of my throat, the bridge of my nose, the crown of my head. I'm popping square peppermints and dark La Mauny Rum with the pulp of passion fruit and sour pink grapefruit laced with cayenne pepper. You can't imagine the taste in my mouth. I am burning down. Or I am fighting fire with fire here.

The night is searing through the window, hot and starry. I am seated at a small, wooden desk. It is too small for my frame, and I keep banging my knees against the low, unforgiving base. I'm finding it hard not to fidget in this rickety Austrian No. 14 chair. I don't understand. How can this be one of the best-selling chairs in the world? It creaks when I lean forward, and moans when I sit back. I'm finding it hard to focus on relaying any of the facts at hand, easy to sip the rum next to me and stare at the typewriter for minutes on end. My hands are at my side- but I was in the middle of an explanation, wasn't I? I was saying, speaking, something... my fingers on keys, a message hammered out in the silence, tapped out, some Morse code to save me before an untimely end.

Oh, this place! I want to chuck my boots at this place. I want to leave all the faucets running. I want to spin out a ripped feather pillow- open seams to the air! I'm not talking about this house. This is just a house- and for the last few days I have had no problem with bamboo floors under my feet or the rusting ceiling fan above my head. It's the place between the two that is the problem. In much the same way, it's not the white stretch of beach outside, the bar on the corner, or the shops on the waterfront. It's some other place- a place between all those places that's the issue.

In the back of my mind, there is a river of songs and passages raging, bluffing- but it's like the ocean that surrounds the island, a salty burn, as I cough it up. I am living at the wrong temperature- and my body is like a whole town filling up with smoke. But I don't want to burn anything down. I just want to light something up. I don't want to pull all the fire alarms. I just want to fill the air with sound. That's not a crime, is it?

I want to tell you everything, all at once- a river, a bonfire, a floor, a ceiling. I want to tell you more about this chair! I want to tell you about the woman who it belonged to first. 'Jacqueline' and never 'Jacque-Lynn' but 'Jacque-Leen', meant to be pronounced with a French accent. I never even called her Jacqueline! I called her Jack. Maybe I don't want to tell you about her. I want to discuss rather predictable things like what I should have done with my life, and why I never should have left Europe that one time, and how I might have been a great writer if not for a bright blue ocean and a black stringed instrument. Or maybe, I want to tell you about standing motionless on the docks today, listening to the quickening wind through other people's wrapped sails, utterly absent- lost in some elaborate daydream of nothing but escape, ready to run, already gone. No. I want to tell you about this place. I want to tell you that I hate this damn chair! I want to elaborate on the superior comforts of a hand-crafted Jean Avisse armchair, restored, plump, covered in blushing flowers and tangled leaves. I suppose I am somewhere between these things- a woman, an accent, a chair, a daydream.

It's nothing. Or it's nothing new, I should say. We are all born between things. Certainly, I was born between common enough things- a man and a woman, and island sky and a city by

the sea. My father was a sailor and a violinist, and my mother was a thief and a poet. Wait! Were they those things? Well, they were many other things I suppose, but I knew them best as those. I lived with them both along the California Coast, the Louisiana marshes, the islands of Greece, the tall grasses of New Zealand, and the drowsy volcanoes of Hawaii. All of which I mention in some passing desperate measure to convey- there has never been one place for me, and I am always between things. When they died, I inherited a boat, yellowing notebooks full of poetry, and a homeless soul that had never settled down in one place for more than a few months. I was nineteen.

Forget it. I am not here to tell a story. I'm swallowing back the plot, somewhere in the thick stinging roar over my tongue. I'm only here to type one word after another. I'm only here out of habit. I've lived my life this way- one word after another- somewhere in the back of my throat.

I'm confused by the fever. I feel this tender nostalgia for the beads of sweat pressing through my skin, through the pores of my soul. Years ago, when I was a boy of sixteen and I fell in love for the first time, I ran a fever far worse than this one. My love was a dizzy thing and burned in my blood. There was no metaphor to it. I was so impassioned for that year, I ran a fever all the time. I went to a doctor- wondering if what I had was contagious. People who casually grazed my arm would gasp- *You are too hot! What's the matter? Are you sick?* To which I would reply in a direct tone with a faintly wicked smile, 'Yes, and there is no cure...' I was such a smug bastard. Now, in the grips of a common cold, a scorching fever, it reminds me of being in love- and getting well, losing the familiar traces of hot delirium- it does not hold the joy that it should.

I am burning down- but it's more than the fever this time. There's a fire ripping in my chest every time I try to get up out of the chair. My left arm stabs and pulses hot blood into my brain, and my vision swirls inside a forest on fire- red, orange, black.

There's a knock at the door.

I don't move. I want him to know that I've lost all feeling in my arms and legs. I'm not faking it this time. Maybe when I was younger, but now I can't get a good breath of air, and the world has become all the wrong colors. I hear him jostle the lock and call through the beach house. He does not burst through the door. He does not run frantically in. He switches the light on with the utmost composure, and walks very steadily to where I am predictably slumped over the typewriter. He wants me to know that he does not believe me at all.

He places his hand on my forehead. I cough. I moan. I make some pathetic effort to shoo his hand away. He tilts my head back, and lifts my eyelids so that it feels like my eyes are going to pop out of their sockets. He puts two fingers under my neck and looks at his watch. He is not a doctor- but I have seen him re-thread a vintage wicker Peacock chair, revive a drowning tourist, and deliver a baby horse. I think he can tell what is wrong. I think he knows my illness and can call it by name.

"Just say it, Charles." It's my failing fitful heart. It's my broken spirit. It's my lungs, my ribcage, my stomach. I'm diseased. I am sweating and dying. I'm thirty years old, and there's nothing left but to incinerate the last of my words, and scatter what's left in ashes.

"We have to go," he states, a trace of sympathy seeping through against his will.

"Lance, Russell, Cadence..." I croak out, as if they are the crux of my main objections.

"They're loading the plane right now." He looks away abruptly, scanning the room for valuables. He is cutting my losses for me. "I came back for you," he begins, as if there is a great explanation to follow, but does not continue speaking after that.

He grabs the guitar first and then disappears out the door. He comes back immediately, flips open the leather satchel at my feet and begins to gather the loose sheets of paper on the floor around me. He flips through the files on the table next to me, as if they hold the answers to the questions he has been afraid to ask. Quickly, he lumps the pages together and shoves them in the bag. His eyes dart sharply behind me. He rises, starts and stops like a dancer, checking the closet and looking behind furniture. I watch him- distant, amused, betrayed.

"Where's the case?" he asks dispassionately. It always pains him to let it play out. He never wants a scene.

"I don't understand," I whine like a six year old who knows perfectly well what his parents are saying. We were under siege from all manner of natural chaos. The air was swelling, the island was fuming, and heaven was falling. There was a tropical depression in some direction- humid, threatening, schizophrenic. They called it a low pressure, this incapacitating swelter, this infatuated pining for the trade winds that had driven us all to sweat and drink.

"It is only a Tropical Depression-" I continue, even though the words in my throat feel like I am pressing into the underside of pincushion. As my voice scrapes against the prospect of audible sound, I have to choke back the hacking again.

"Ha," he scoffs as if he has remembered the punchline to the joke being told. "It was a Tropical Depression two days ago, man. It's a bloody Hurricane now. Felicia. Do you know what Felicia is going to do to this place? If we leave now, we can make it to Basse-Terre and get inland. By morning, this will all be..." he motions with his hands, as if he cannot remember the exact words for havoc, ruin, devastation.

Oh, this paradise, this preoccupation, this place! I hated it more each time. I was glad the storm was coming to rip it apart in the same fashion it had ripped into my heart from the start. I hoped it laid it low beneath the sea! Maybe then I could be rid of it. I loathed the manner with which I had come to lust for it- more than the arms of any lover, more than the promise of love itself. I hated playing a set in that damn corner bar, especially the way I'd begin to see my future spill out before me. It was an overwhelming barrage of the most lavish visions. I could see myself growing old here. I would settle down with my guitar. I would play at the bar, at the little beach. I would sing the oldest songs. I would find the right story here.

"Where is the case for your goddamn typewriter? I'm not fucking around. Tell me where it is!" As violently as possible, he throws my head back, lifting my chin with a firm hand until my eyes roll around to meet his sober gaze.

"I said just leave it, Charles," I cough out, like the captain of a wooden toy ship, with whatever command I have left. "Leave the papers, too."

"Don't give me a problem. You're writing something, aren't you?" This was an accusation with clemency.

"What is it?" he mused, kneeling down to the satchel of half-typed pages. "A book? A fiction? A biography?" Reaching down, he lifts a page from the many crammed in the bag.

"Dear Shawn," he says in blank confusion, and then hesitates. "Letters? We don't know anyone named Shawn."

He rifles through the pages in exasperation, muttering the names of the addressees as if they are the key witnesses in his investigation. Andres- crossed out and rewritten as Andy. James. Kristian with a K.

"Are these letters?" he asks, genuinely baffled. "But why do you have them all, don't you need to send them, then?"

"They've already been sent," I reply sourly. It was true. My letters were paper airplanes already hurled off different decks. I'd sent them off again and again, without proper aims, without a proper concept of where they might actually land. Maybe they didn't land. Maybe they somehow managed to keep flying unseen into alternate perpetual destinations- open seams to the air!

"It's all the same letter," I say desperately. "It's not a story at all. It's just my words, over and over again. I can change the names, the dates, the places- but they all say the same thing. They don't say anything else."

I want to begin to explain to him how many times exactly I've penned the same sentences, and that when I re-read the old correspondence of Shelley and Keats and Coleridge, I feel I must have written all those letters too. I'd written the letters of Elliot and Dylan and Auden. What a pompous admission! But in our letters, we are all talking about the same thing. We are speaking of it again and again and again. We are dressing it up. We are drinking it down. We are stealing the best words from ourselves. We are sincerely, yours.

It was like watching Russell play the violin. He made the notes dance up and down the scales- from all the same notes as Paganini. He used all the same notes, and these were all the same words, and we were all saying the same thing. We kept trying to speak or to sing or to rewrite some long eternal music.

"Why?" he pauses to demand innocently enough. Damn you, Charles. You know why.

My life has been lived in letters.

Since the age of seven, growing up in the Marlborough Sounds, I was writing letters. Back then, I wrote most of them to American cousins, none of whom still spoke to me. By the time I was twenty, my heart was all over the map- California, France, Spain and New York. I sent them all love letters- free of proximity, obligation, fidelity. They might be my lovers for a moment, but I would make them my family forever. Letters were my birthday presents, my christmas presents, my congratulations, my condolences. Besides, I was certain I would look back on those written translations of love as some odd homage to my dead and precious

writers of the past. I felt certain that I was destined to join their rank- with many, many lovers that came and went but words that burned forever.

Now, the whole idea seemed entirely ridiculous, contemptible, blasphemous.

I inspected the man before me searching his eyes like criminals in a line-up. Maybe he didn't know why. I yearned to explain it fully to him- to explain the mania of it to myself- but I doubted I could ever explain anything again- not the way I'd like to, not with a firm command of the truth, not with any clarity of language. Besides, it mattered less and less as a rumbling gust heaved across the roof above us. I gave him the only answer pushing through my teeth.

"I threw the case out the window. Yesterday, I think..." I am noncommittal. I don't really remember when.

Moments later, he reappears with the open cage for my black metal monster. I rip the half-written page from its teeth. I crumple it into a ball in my fist. I allow my mind to wander past him, trying to grasp at my final impressions of the room. I won't see it this way again- the linen curtains, the bamboo accents, this damn chair.

In the midst of my inventory, he hoists me into his arms, slings me into a graceful cradle, the way I have seen him handle his guitar countless times. He pulls me through the door, my head against his shoulder as if I am a sleeping infant. He smells wonderful- the way your best friend's house can begin to smell better than your own. I want to tell him that before I infect him with my rank sweat.

"Christ! You're burning up..." he exclaims, wiping off the perspiration with his clean skin. But I object, "No, no," my voice betraying some stabbing loss in the cool outside air. "No, I am burning down, Charles..."

He laughs at me then. He yanks open the Jeep door and deposits me effortlessly in the passenger seat. I am delirious and sentimental. I am about to lose it- whatever you want to call it- my temper, my rationale, my slippery grip on existence. My hands are beginning to shake, as they have for the last year when I get too upset. I am clutching the wadded page in my hand too tightly. I am crushing the words beyond repair. A cannonball is swinging through my soul, soon to burst the delicate walls of my resolve. I am going to start crying and carrying on again.

"What about Jack?" I wail sorrowfully as we make our way along the bumpy road that will soon be a river of raging mud.

"What about Jack? Nothing she didn't know was coming. She'll build it all again, better than before. You know she always rebuilds it. What? Three times now."

It was true. I counted back the storms in my mind. It took a certain kind of person to want to live in the path of destruction. Jack could make a home the way some people whipped a mouthwatering dinner out of nothing but scraps. And every so often, I needed her home-cooking. Who else could know the pang in my stomach? She knew me well. Yes. I was the man all tattered and torn, who lay in the house that Jack built.

We were pummeling through intermittent sheets of rain that slapped themselves violently into the open jeep. The wheels were kicking up night and mist. I began to shiver uncontrollably and sob in the same manner. My eyes fixed on the blue sky above. Blue, like sapphires born in the belly of the earth on a far-off continent. The wind was berating, chastising as it whipped away a hot stream of tears. The road was disappearing in puddles and debris and all my dearest memories. It was more than a hurricane now, it was another ocean forming from every inlet, pond and river.

I wince. A river- oh, that's it exactly. I'd been writing about a river, hadn't I? I had been trying to force some plot with the Greek goddess of rivers, Tethys herself. Instead, Acheron had come in her place to ferry away all hope of narrative fruition. How I yearned to write something beautiful, full of fancy and fantasy, something to transport myself from this tedious world into some godly realm. I spent everyday failing, everyday for years. Now, there was only this generic drudgery left- human, affected, earthbound.

Keep driving, Charles, I want to beg. Let's keep on this dark stretch of highway, even though we both know this road loops around the whole island. Let's keep on, even though we are bound to end up exactly in the same place, sooner rather than later.

He jerks the wheel sharply in response, skidding through the airport entrance. I make out the familiar silhouettes of friends, instruments, against the lights of a small private plane. Everyone is ready to move on. They are going to drag me to Guadeloupe, and then to Miami- onstage to a sold out amphitheater under the stars. We are going to sing loudly, spin brightly, be a smash.

We are late- and I've been pandering like a fool. They have been patient with me, while I've been telling myself the most beautiful lies. I could've sworn it was the truth. I could've sworn the only story that mattered was on this island. Sobs are being pulled from me now- like loose threads yanked in haste. The storm is going to swallow the island, eat it alive, chew it apart- and I can't swallow. I can't digest this.

"Christ," he snaps impatiently, "You inconsiderate prick! Stop making that insufferable noise!" he slams the Jeep into gear. The stress is lovely on his knuckles- blotchy red and fury white. He doesn't understand why I can't be a man. He reaches over and pulls me up by the collar like I am slouching in church. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," I say petulantly. "Nothing is the matter, Mother."

He drops me immediately. He wants me to know that he does not have time for me. He swings out of the car, gathers what he can from the back and darts across the darkened tarmac to the others. I kick the door open and fall out onto my feet. I am already sobering, balancing, managing. I curse at no one. Wasn't I sick enough? Hadn't I drunk enough? How could I be... coming around again?

I fall against the back of the Jeep for support, staring at the odd collection of belongings that I am the weary owner of. I reach for the handle on my typewriter case, forgetting that it is too heavy, falling backwards. A pair of large muscled arms reach over me, sliding the case easily out of my reach. I watch as Lance carts the machine away. He does not acknowledge me, and

knows better than to offer me a hand up off the ground. I feel overwhelmed, pathetic, infuriated.

Within minutes, Charles is back and has both our guitars in his hands. He waits as I clamber to my feet in the drizzle and darkness. I reach for my guitar. I remember the first time I ever saw a guitar, like a beautiful woman in a crowded bar, all wrong in the arms of another man.

"It's fine," he mutters with pity and devotion. "Let me carry it. Really, I've already-" he looks down mutely. Carried it this far? Done this for so long? Held it together for the both of us? "It's fine," he offers, his voice bargaining in restraint and constant charity.

"I'll carry my own damn guitar," I snap, as if he is a servant who has overstepped his bounds. He hands me the case with placating compliance. I am offended, as if I have some dignity left intact, when in fact, I do not. I know that. I do- but I suppose even a dissident prince may find himself defending honor somewhere, out of habit.

He leaves it at my feet, and as he turns his back on me to walk away, I am wounded, outraged, plotting. I still have the crumpled page crushed into a small wad in my hand. I chuck it at the back of his head. "Thank you, though!" I yell out maliciously, full of spite and false cheer. I feel better when it thwacks him directly between the ears.

He glances back, annoyed and flippant. "You're still so young."

"Well, a young man ain't got nothin' in the world these days..." I whisper hatefully, stumbling past him, my words lost somewhere in the weather. The wind burns in my eyes, it is a bonfire in my lungs, and I feel jealous, corporeal, obsessed. The wind can holler and whistle and moan. I want to be the wind. I want to be sound itself, that other language, the arrow in my own heart. Oh, to be the air! Oh, to fill the air with sound!

"What?" he asks distractedly, despite himself.

"I said," turning in my tracks, "A young man," I holler across the rift between us, "Ain't got nothin' in the world these days!" Like strings on a beginner's guitar, it strikes me that I am wound far too tightly. "Ain't got..." I cough, spitting through my teeth, blood and intent racing through my veins like cannonballs into war. "Nothing!" my voice rips from the confines of my common cold. "Nothing!" It is a shrill ache ricocheting off the sky.

Somewhere behind me, I know the storm is playing to the crowd. Kicking my case to the ground, I rip out my guitar and lift it against the stage of the world. Maybe I am only yelling. Maybe I wish I were singing. "He's got," I bellow horribly, still trying to settle an old score, "Fuck all." And I don't hesitate for a minute. I slam the guitar on the tarmac. It crunches in a jarring vibrato shuddered down my arm. Upon impact, I know the strings that have been holding everything together are coming apart. I arch my back, as violently as possible, and smash it into the earth again. I can feel the music breaking and flying in every direction. It's so familiar. I've done it so many times before- with other songs that could only be played once. The memory is alive in my muscles. The map is in my bones. I am sorry again I cannot carry a tune- and that there is a rather short-lived timeframe for lifting the weight of sound.

Every muscle burns across my chest. Within seconds, I feel arms grab me like shackles. I feel three sets of hands forcing me against the ground. I begin thrashing. I punch at anything. I am fighting with nothing. I want to say something, to explain something- but I know my best words are back somewhere in a half-written letter. Russell and Charles have my arms, and I am kicking at Lance. They lift me in the air, gripping me at both ends, as I squirm between them. Lance slaps me like a woman across the face. It stuns me briefly. Everything buzzes, shines in the rain. In my head, I hear the sound of guitars, I hear someone else's hands on my strings. They unwind into the world, into the frenzy, into the calm, into the great wide open.

I am still fussing, as the raindrops sink and splatter into my eyes, faster and heavier like wet kisses. Suddenly, I see it for what it is. Another needless disaster. I am as bad as the storm. Why is it so hard to just to let nature take its course? I am burning down, but the rain is there to put me out- to douse the fire. I won't become cinders today, and it is just as well. Because this is not the grand finale. It is best to move on. I cannot really have the scene I want.

The three of them drag me across the tarmac and the rain plopping through my eyelashes blurs their faces beyond recognition. The clouds gathering seem darker, like the gods chasing me on. The wind is coming up, like drums backstage, in fits and starts. I am settling, weeping, swooning.

In the end, does passion weaken us or strengthen us? I feel my body, the same body which raged and shattered my guitar all on its own minutes ago, now too weak to persuade my muscles to bear any real weight. I am collapsing, and it is suddenly easy to let my friends carry me, contort my limbs, and shove my frame inside the plane. I stare at the suspended round beads that cling to my black sweater and jeans- as if they could be brushed off- as if they will not soak into the denim or cotton, or into my very bones, if I play my cards just right.

I am dimly aware that they are strapping me in to another chair, a chair that will take me close to heaven.

I lean my head against the thick plastic window. I can see nothing. I can feel everything. I am drowning in thoughts of my corner bar. I try not to think about who will sing for them when I am gone. I hope Terre-De-Bas can be built again- in the same way I imagine country folk hope for a good crop season or sunshine on a garage sale day. Maybe it's completely in vain, this kind of hope, and it rattles against the walls of my sorrow. I was never the sort to believe that our sorrows are what give us character. We have character all on our own, in the throes of our inaction, in the timbre of our words- even when they mean nothing. Sorrow is just what gets left behind in the plot, like any highway that spills out behind you as you're driving on to somewhere else. And with some varieties of sorrow, we can take the cannonballs in our chests and use them as fuel, inspiration to burst forth with creative language, art, music, all that. But I wasn't certain that every sorrow could transition into creativity. Sometimes our sorrow just needed to be healed.

I sigh against the sound of slamming doors, orders and checklists being yelled that sound important. As the engine roars a dark, low melody, I close my eyes and see Nepenthe, a small restaurant that I love dearly around Big Sur. They put whole cinnamon sticks, cloves, and orange peels in their rum spiced hot cider, which they serve in glass beer mugs. Nepenthe- which means 'a drug of forgetfulness' or 'one that chases away sorrow.' Nepenthe- mentioned

by Homer and Shelley and Poe. At some point I typed in a letter "If I were building a home, Nepenthe would be my kitchen, boasting one of the best views in the house." I was building myself a home this way- from rooms all over the world.

I found home every now and again. That place of true rest and ease of being that could somehow heal you- inside and out. I knew now that Terre-De-Bas was my Nepenthe of the Caribbean- and that is why I had made them bring me here. I had needed to come home. I had needed something to heal.

In any case, I was leaving now. I'd left before, and the practice didn't make it easier. And where was I going? And did it matter? I felt my full weight fall against the back of my chair, and the sensation of leaving the earth slam into my gut.

I play with possibility- that there is some part of me waiting to be found in the places I will be going to next. Maybe there is some part of me to be found out there, and I will be so surprised to find it, to find that it has been waiting for me all along- at some table in Florence, some harbor in California, or some island off the coast of Spain. It doesn't really matter how it got there. Maybe I left it somewhere by accident. Maybe I gave it to someone along the way. I don't know. Do we give ourselves away? If so, then I'd given myself away to many, many people- in letters, photographs, songs and sentences, in corner bars and countries.

I gave the best of what I had, and then moved on. We all did. It was part of being in a band. We traveled the great wide world together, one venue at a time, without any promises that we would be back. We were on our way from checkered pasts into our bright, burning futures. On and on and on we went- learning all the while that traveling was in our hearts. It was the law we shared.

You keep moving. Even if eventually there are very few towns that don't invoke the smell of someone you once loved, or loved still, or never had the chance to love the way you imagined real love to feel. Even if there are very few bars that you haven't already played. And very few places you felt like coming back to- and even fewer that stayed around long enough for you to come back to.

I wonder what parts of myself I will lose on the way, or am leaving behind. Moving always forces me into this two-fold examination of what I've been stripped of and confrontation of what I've chosen to cling to. I always take the guitar, the typewriter, and a leather satchel full of half-written pages. I suffer all my losses theatrically. I resolve to start over, to escape old mistakes, to build something out of nothing. I embark on every new horizon grappling with the past. Rather ungracefully, I commit the remnants of memories to memoirs. I vow to step bravely onto each new stage. I am always hoping I can pull off the performance and delivery of the part- even in the tattered remains of a backstage scrap costume. I am the lead singer. I have already wrapped that string around the thick rope of my destiny. I have forced my fingers to braid it into everything else I am- son, traveler, writer, philosopher, lover, friend, stranger, painter, and old guitar player.

Only a week ago, I'd played my guitar, hanging off the side of the boat, trying to summon Poseidon himself. I was always trying to summon the gods- wasn't I? I was always trying to cast some divine light on my human face. I had wanted to find my story in the Caribbean. I

had wanted the tropics and that beach house and my ocean nearby ... but whatever I wanted hardly mattered now. It was besides the point. The Caribbean. That part of the story was going to end- and all the sunset descriptions that went with it.

Why did something inside me feel stranded on that old island? And like something in me was running away. Such was the nature of my affair with language. A mad affair. We broke up all the time, until once more, the right words came to seize me in the middle of the night, and I returned to the same stories again. I could fight and surrender- be an island and an ocean. Shawn had said I was wrong, though. There were plenty of other words in the sea. And I wasn't burning down. In his earliest letters, he said my words were a torch.

I quieted at the thought of him. Oh, that's it exactly- I'd been writing another letter to him, hadn't I? Yes, it had been just as the fever was setting in- and it hadn't mattered that I had said everything a million times before. Of course, Shawn had nothing to do with this- except for the fact that he had come into my life while it was all happening. I remembered the rooftop, the first time I heard his voice, and the long-ago nights when we were strangers. He was my friend now and had inspired me time and again when inspiration was thin on the ground. Something about his life or maybe something written on his face reminded me of the point to what I had been saying all along. And he made me want to say it better this time.

When I got to Miami I would write him again. Next, I would tell him about the girl, the boat, and the strange long trip to Wales. I'd write a brand new letter then, wouldn't I?

Though, a letter was always such a fragile, ridiculous way to begin anything, to believe in something, or to base anything on. I'd fling my heart into it anyway. A heart was for beating. A heart was for loving... and my heart was for this too. For pulsing through the mystery and terror of each new experience in a beautiful defiant rhythm- and for housing hope, like a vagrant, when it had no other home. I wanted to laugh at it- and at myself- but after all these years, after so many words, and so high above the earth about to lose sight of the last of my dear island, I began to cry softly again.

Through a veil of salt that belonged to the sea, I saw my drummer and bass player exchange concerned looks. They would send the tambourine girl now.

Cadence came to me then, easing herself gently into my lap. Her fingers swirled through my hair, and her arms wrapped around my neck in the rising altitude. She kissed away all my objections on the arch of my right eyebrow. She turned my head from the window, and closed my eyes with her warm fingertips. She placed her hand over my ear, as if trying to protect me from overhearing something profane. She smelled of coconut oil and hotel shampoo. The scent was sweet and good, but only made the grief worse. She did not smell like home, and I had no idea how long it would be before anything did again. I felt an untouched reserve of tears emptying themselves in her arms. "Hush, it's all over, " she murmured against my ear. She said the word 'over' with kindness and finality. It's all over.

And that was the trouble with these last few years, my scattered affairs, all my letters, and this place.

It was always over- in heartache, in a fever- and before it had really begun.