i: art is a lover

I hate it when my hand cannot bring to life what is so clear in my mind. How much easier this would be if I could spill all of my thoughts out onto the walls with no interpreter. Sometimes I speak in a language that the paint doesn’t understand. I yell at it, I whisper to it, I command it, I get on my knees and I beg for it to hear me. But there’s a glass wall between us, and though it tries to read my lips, we just aren’t getting through to each other.

Sometimes, though, the paint does hear me. When I yell, the sound echoes and I see it in the blood red as it drips off my brush. When I whisper, the canvas shivers until the snowy window I’ve envisioned starts to look like frosted-over panes of glass, cold to the touch. When I command, the colors yield on bended knees, handing over the crown so that I never had to beg for it.

It is because of these power-trip highs and hellish lows that I know I will never have another love as great. How could I, when my affair with art has so efficiently stolen my heart. No happiness compares to the wild freedom it grants me, and no despair cuts so deeply as the one brought on by the inability to express myself.
It would break me, I think, if it were to all go away. All the paintings, sketches, captured-moments of peace and of conflict and of pain. All the colors telling me how to see the world with my soul, rather with my eyes. All the drama of the heart, put on show for the world to see, as if looking in a mirror. I would be a shattered, useless creature without all of that, without this love to keep me alive.

ii: art is god

In every foreign city that I visit, I inevitably go to a museum or two in search of pieces of my soul. When in Florence, I look for my reflection in the eyes of a Renaissance woman painted on a canvas in the Uffizi, and then on the next trip I try to find my way home in a fall-colored Pissarro in Denver. I stand in front of these paintings until my heels hurt from being in one place for too long, but the pain doesn’t matter if it means I find what I’m looking for. Sometimes it’s hidden in the Mariana Trench blue of a Rothko, other times it’s as startlingly obvious as the look in Judith’s eye as she slays Holofernes in Gentileschi’s second rendition of the biblical murder.

Regardless of the form or color, there are magnetic threads to be found in every painting, and I am forever, relentlessly searching for them. They call to me, almost too-quietly, so that when I’m in the open space of the museum I feel like I can’t breathe, or else the sound of my exhale will drown out the whispers of art. It’s ok, though. My next breath is a worthy sacrifice.

It’s all worth it to me. My heels, my breath, my eyes that glaze over after looking for too long in too dark of a room. My mindspace, given to artists who preach their lifestyle from the grave,
telling me to sell it all for a momentary muse. My sleep, gone the instant my tired mind catches fire on the kindling of an idea. All of it in the name of art.

I hope that after I die, my soul goes to a European cafe and drinks espresso with Franz Marc, who would surely love the romantic peace of contemplating over a coffee in the late afternoon. He would teach me how to see color the way he does, and all the while my mind would be wandering back to the art I left behind, hoping that it is enough. Enough to steal someone’s breath, enough to give them pause. Enough to be their altar, for just one moment, and to be the idol of reverence in their second glance.

iii: art is a nightmare

I always have the worst nightmares after struggling to fall asleep. It’s like my mind is too busy thinking, taking up space in the dark silence, to realize that something sinister has crept up on it. It’s like a child wandering through a maze, lost amongst the emerald hedges. It goes left here at the fork. Left again. Then right. And then that something sinister pounces, dragging me off to a punishing sleep filled with gothic tragedies and haunting realizations of fears I didn't know I had.

Lately, there’s been a recurring theme to these nightmares. They all have to do with war. Each night is a variation on the theme. Monday was bombs, and the scenes were very Munich circa 1944. Tuesday was the navy, placing me on a warship off the coast of some Southern-Hemisphere island. I remember how that dream faded in and out, like someone was flipping a switch back and forth. I woke up with a feeling of panic, only I couldn’t remember what I was panicking about.
Last night it was industry, like the way every factory stops what it was doing before the war and starts making weapons. While my body slept, my mind was looking over the Willamette River at the wartime industry and docks scattered along its edge. It looked like a photograph of a Bierstadt painting; in reality the view would be shocking and vivid, but the quality’s been drained out by the camera-middleman. The heavy brushstrokes that brought the scene to life were somber and captivating. The river was midnight black, like a reflection of a storm coming in from the mountains. The factories sitting on the edge of the river, done in a ghost shade of grey, looked out of place. Even in a dream, they stood out as foreign amongst such sublime nature. I still remember the way the windows of the factories glowed in a sad, ironic sort of way. The light was both beautiful and haunting, the way it can only be in a nightmare. They were like a hand reaching out, tempting me to go further into what could only be a more painful and personal reckoning with whatever was happening in this nightmare-world.

It was all so still, which is unusual for any dream of mine. Usually, these scenes go by so fast I could never get the details like this. In some ways it is worse, I think, to have this static companion to accompany all my action-movie nightmares. I can still feel the quiet horror of looking over a place I love, turned to a mechanization of violence and death. I wish I didn’t know exactly how it would look, but now I do, and it’s eternally painted in my mind. I hate the way my nightmares play out so exquisitely, as if they know that even in my fear, I have no choice but to love their beauty, as I am so far gone I can’t even save myself.