



HEART





Fire + Blood

I'm used to staring at myself in the mirror. For hours on end. Countlessly, endlessly, loudly, obsessively. My gaze feels warm. A fire burning through layers of my flesh until I can feel the rot set into my core.

The sublime erupts. The flame of my eyes burns cold through every inch. It ignites with pleasure.

A pleasure that is easy to explain. Palatable. The kind that exhausts before vanity. But it soon descends. Hotter. Darker. Harder. Into a flame that begins to hurt. That lingers. Lingers for far too long.

It turns my reflection into a grotesque reminder of who I am. Not of here, nor of there. A gross, shameful pleasure like scratching a scab for too long takes over my mind.

An itch that doesn't leave. That I dig deeper into until the wrinkles of my mind begin to bleed.

I like blood.
The smell of it,
the feel of it,
sometimes even its taste.

It's earthy.

Blood doesn't burn the way I do.

My shape changes at my thoughts. My whims dictate my form.



**I Must Exist.
(I must exist)**

The world is just a series of perceptions I form. Based on information that is real? That is wrong? Whether I know it or not, my reality is just as subjective as the lyrics of songs. Just as curated. As exact, as performatively effortless.

I learned too early that discerning between a truth and a lie is unimportant. A lie can be real if you believe it is.

(I must exist).

Everything is real if you believe it is.

(I must exist).

So I lied. I lied, and I lied, and then I lied again. Again and again and again until I forgot how to discern a truth from a lie.

My truth from the lies that I had spun around myself. I lied about my origins, I lied about my race, I lied about the sports I liked, the people I followed, the people I loved, and about those I hate. I lied to form myself against myself. I lied to affirm myself by making another one of me. I lied to create a rival, a friend, a completely new identity.

But I was caught between the two of us. I fractured myself. I caused a schism, an earthquake, an unhealable rift that tore through the very essence of my fabric. I was caught in the fiery between: real or imagined, true or false?

Must I exist?





Dreams!

I like to marinate in my thoughts. To think them until they lose form. Like stretching a rubber band until it breaks.

Sometimes I think my mind is a rubber band;
my thoughts are the elastic, and myself,
my being, my abstract consciousness are the fingers that run through it, pull it, push it.

To the brink.

Nowadays, I feel my dreams.

They live in my face.

In its tingles.

On my cheeks,
under my eyes, in my nose.

It feels like intoxication.

A mist, a haze, a fog that clouds my vision. It takes me out of the mundane. I might be walking down the street, but I don't have to do just that in my mind. So instead I traverse its depths.

I think until I'm dizzy.



I'm precise in constructing them.

Etching them with needles in the inside of my mind.

Poking, prodding, shaping, chiseling.

I feel my brain contort. I feel it scrunch. I feel it being wrangled.
The tension pulses through it as the fibers begin to give out.

My dreams liquify.

They deform.

I can taste them in the back of my mouth.

They gush right out. Onto the sides of my lips, down my chin, onto
my hands. They squeeze out of my eyes.

Liquid pierces through.

Until my tears are marked by the dreams I dreamt for too long. The
liquid stains the walls. Black. Dark. Opaque. Musty. It slashes. I
am drowning. Sometimes I am consumed. I am trapped by the
vision of who I want to be.

Hope turns into fear. Into dread.



Vrinda Das is a Bombay-based writer specializing in nonfiction prose, songwriting, and screenplay. She explores the narratives hidden in everyday life at the intersection of the self and the external world. Her work is inspired by the ephemeral. Vrinda studies Cinema and Media Studies at the School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California.

Zongyi Wang is a beginner photographer always eager to learn and exercise his creativity. Zongyi studies Business Administration at the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California.

Michael Castellanos is a Los Angeles-based designer specializing in graphic design. He implements empathy within his design to drive his creative direction. Michael studies Design and Architecture at the Roski School of Art & Design and the USC School of Architecture, University of Southern California.

Models

Aditi Jagannathan
Alizée Jacquinet

