

You meet me outside my school, just like old times. You're standing beneath the mountainous grey nimbus clouds, happy to see me and I'm relieved you're not sad like I thought you might have been the last time I saw you— *a year ago now*.

We fling gravel as we walk our usual route, raindrops clinging like snowflakes to our clothes. We talk shit, get two dollar burgers, use my fake ID to buy beers, just like we used to. You wave yours away which I think is funny but maybe that's normal for you now, so I guzzle it all no worries just excited you're here, while you laugh at me tipsy, licking the burger juice off my palms like a cat.

When the rain stops, we lay down across the sleek growth rings of our tree stump in the playground and wait for the stars to be flung out above us like an old, familiar blanket. We count low planes, pink from the sunset, cheeks sore from smiling.

I wonder if you can read minds now and my stomach flips because I think about you a lot, even after all this time, *a whole year*. I think of us sitting on my bed that morning you snuck in, long brushstrokes of blood and bruises down your legs from sliding through my window. I think of us kissing all night, listening to slow songs, your fingertips ticking off my freckles one by one like they were tiny flecks of gold.

I want to ask if you could lean over, slide your hands under my jumper and touch me like old times. I want to say I have condoms hidden in my school bag, unopened, saved for you, bought with bright red cheeks, embarrassed because that's something you always did. But how can I, really? When it seems silly now you're here and some part of me is unsure if you're okay— If you've really forgiven me. So we sit in silence and I don't mind at all.

We sat like this when your mum died too, ears rammed shut with static, blocking out the word that hummed around us like a wasp, *suicide*, until finally you told me you hated how life was just an endless string of sad goodbyes. A ceaseless parade of boxing up people and milestones and if we weren't forced to make such a fuss maybe it wouldn't hurt so

bad. So we promised to never say: “see ya”. We’d just walk away, and in our minds pretend we were always together.

*You saved me*, you used to say— from loneliness, from your dad’s heavy hand when he smelled of rum, from the boring, shitty suburbs that were killing our parents slowly and painfully. But you were wrong about that, about me. And I wonder if your flickering smile is a hologram, hiding a deep, eternal sadness.

As the night sprawls out before us, the nimbus clouds come back and float like cliff peaks, obscuring the full moon. The glow of your body is getting cooler and when you stand up to leave you’re so much taller than I remember. You look stretched out, waif-like, so very tired of pretending.

Still, I ask you to stay awhile, to walk me home for old time’s sake and I’m glad you do even though I know I’m being selfish. As we walk across the soccer field for the millionth time, our feet wet, our breath turned to smoke, puffing on invisible cigars, I know we can’t avoid what’s coming. When we get to my doorstep you’re already fading away, thinner than baking paper, so worn out I can see straight through you to my mum’s sedan.

Your top has washed away in the drizzle and the red electrodes on your chest are visible now, iridescent like floating orbs, the silhouette of your IV drip appearing, silver like the stars. I don’t want to turn my back like the old days and leave you on the street all alone.

This time, I want to be brave. This time, I want to swallow the fear that rips razor blades through my windpipe, the same fear I found at the hospital *a whole year ago*, when they said those fancy words— arrhythmia, arrest— some minor fault in the mechanics of your heart, dormant since the day you were born. That sometimes shitty things happen to good kids, that now, it was *time to say goodbye*. But how could I, really? So I walked away. I told myself you’d want me to keep our pact, no “see-ya’s,” no goodbyes. That this way, I could preserve you and pretend forever. But in truth— I was scared. In truth, not being there has haunted me ever since.

So this time, I stand in the cold and stare. I want to see all of it, your heart beating its last through filmy skin, your full lips turning blue, bloodless. I watch you melt into the concrete, your size 12 basketball shoes, the last thing to disappear before my front door cracks open. Yellow light, butter frying, hot clothes in the dryer, the unwelcome warmth of life calling for me to come back inside, to move on, to grow up, to finally say goodbye to the old times.

But still, I can't. I'm scared all your solid edges will blur into nothing but smoke on the soccer field and I know you were right all along, that life really is just an endless string of sad goodbyes. So I beg the street lights, like birthday candles, to please let you visit me, *just one more time*. Even though I know you're stretched thin, so very tired of pretending. Even though I know I should let you leave quietly. But how can I, really? When one day I might not be able to remember you at all. When somewhere out there you're sixteen forever, and I'll grow old counting pink planes without you.