

SUNRISE OATH

“There’s nothing to love about the sunrise.”

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Pass me on!

This is a free litzine based in a fictional Waterloo, Ontario.
Send fiction, poetry, articles, opinions, reviews, and comments
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And the wind went out to meet with the sun
At the dawn when the night was done.

And he raked the clouds in lofty disdain
As they flocked in his airy train.

**And the earth was grey, and grey was the sky,
In the hour when the stars must die.**

And the moon had fled with her sad, wan light,
For her kingdom was gone with night.

Then the sun upleapt in might and in power,
And the worlds woke to hail the hour.

And the sea streamed red from the kiss of his brow,
There was glory and light enow.

To his tawny mane and tangle of flush
Leapt the wind with a blast and a rush.

In his strength unseen, in triumph upborne,
Rode he out to meet with the morn!

Editor's Desk

Aurora Vici

SUNRISE OATH lives to see another month. Fanfare, fireworks, cheers! (Solomon and I played a round of *Black Knight: Sword of Rage* to pick the one who has to write this. No comment on who lost.)

A ten-day trip to Halifax affirmed my love of the arts. Galleries, public and private, throughout the downtown area; murals gracing more buildings than I could ever count; trendy cafés and upscale pubs to tease the palate. Here are my three most important experiences from the trip: 1) a thirty-kilometer walk I took on the second day, an ordeal that left me hallucinating and euphoric on top of ending with sudden news of Elizabeth II's death; 2) the first time I ate a lobster, marking my resolve to eat mostly vegetarian til I am comfortable with the link between animal and food; and 3) a lunch of deviled eggs with a glass of Sierra de Enmedio Rosé, a turning point in my appreciation of beauty beyond what the eye and the ear perceive. Halifax's gifts shall stay with me in the years to come.

I attended an evening of talks hosted by *The Walrus* at the Halifax Central Library, and learned much about the current national discourse from conversations with speakers and other attendees. They handed out free copies of the latest issue of their magazine, and reading it in the hour before the start of the event sold me on subscribing. Waiting for the bus back to the AirBnB, I wondered why Waterloo had such an invisible local infrastructure for the arts. Sure, we have festivals, the Jazz Room at Huether Hotel, and the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Lest my aunt the architect be displeased, we also have the William Davis Computer Research Centre, Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, and the neighborhood of Sunview Heights. (See what I did there, Tara?) Yet, I had the feeling that my hometown was not doing enough for the arts. I messaged JD, a brother to me, with these thoughts. Moving forward, I shall commit myself to the practice of art.

Speaking of family: the other day, I asked Eroica to go to a museum with me. She declined, as usual. Collis had poker, so I went with Quinine. Fun times, after so long. To quote a friend: "On sunny days, it matters not where our steps take us."

The Fox's Skulls

Walking Eagle

Ages and ages ago lived a fox who wandered alone, as foxes are doomed to do. She never met humanity, for humanity had yet to make her home into their frontier. Every day was a hunt — for food, for water, for shelter, for tomorrow.

So she lived for the better part of her tender juvenile days.

Twenty moons after her birth, she met a human. Her first human — her first of many — was a woman. A fellow wanderer, seeking bare necessities, but a fugitive, a runaway. Whether from war's ravages or peace's excesses, no one will ever know; the fox, for her part, understood not what it meant to be a runaway. A fox, after all, belonged exactly where she chose to be. The woman, meanwhile, had no place of her own on this earth. Yet she was warm, warmer than the breast of the fox's mother and the rays of the noon sun.

The fox and the woman nurtured their short kinship. Alas, the woman was old and grey, and reached the end of her allotted days. When death did them part, the fox wept and watched the seasons consumed the woman's lifeless remains. After one moon — the fox's twenty-first — there was nothing left of the human except her pristine bones. Sensing in those bones the memory of her friend, the fox resolved to stand guard over them for the rest of her days.

The moon's pale fire waned to nothing. The seven northern stars opened their twinkling eyes and called out to the fox, pleading with her to leave her companion behind. Their cries fell on deaf ears, for the fox bowed not to their authority. She carried on, resolved to die at the woman's resting place.

The stars watched the fox, and took pity. From their heavenly heights, they cast a spell. Wear the woman's skull, they said to the fox, and the woman shall return to life. The fox, unable to resist, followed the stars' instructions and transformed into a human. She took the form of the woman, not as a crone but as a maiden. Through a mess of flowing hair, her eyes fell upon her fair exposed skin.

"I am naked," said the fox in words, and hurried to wear the woman's rags.

From then on, the fox lived not only as herself, but as another. She set out to travel the world, and forever had with her that first skull.

Suicide at Sunview Heights

Solomon Hawthorn

The selfsame person by another pen becomes a whole new character himself. My pen, however, must be practiced further. But when I'm ready, I'll reveal some secrets I've long kept inside. Til then, I'll drop some hints along the way.

I'll write about my cousin Rachel Surry. There was a time when she was everything: my best friend, sister, and maternal figure. She is the younger cousin of my mom — a daughter of her Aunt Eleanor, only a decade older than her niece — making her my first cousin once removed. Since we were young, we were each other's playmates. Great-Aunt Eleanor told little Rachel that she was to take charge of Solomon. This plus the fact she was a little older — her birthday was in January, mine in May the following year — meant Rachel felt responsible for me.

When we were younger, Dad once made a joke.

DAVID HAWTHORN

Since Rachel is the daughter of his great-aunt,
would that not make her Solomon's Aunt Rachel?

He told this joke to Eleanor, who laughed and tried to tease her daughter with it too. Rachel was a little dense, so the next time she came over, she declared:

RACHEL SURRY

I'm now your aunt, and you're my little nephew.

Since then, I've had an 'aunt' one year my senior. I used to call her that in private, though I've become less shameless. I think it was a useful source of comfort that I could think of Rachel as an aunt, as someone who would care for me and love me. I missed my mom a lot back in those days; as her career became her one obsession, she only came back home past my bedtime. Though Dad was fine at meeting all my needs, he was a rather lousy cook. Eleanor helped Dad with taking care of me, but on top of our school's parent council she had young children of her own.

When I was ten, Eleanor stopped coming. Rachel Surry showed up alone with groceries bought with her own allowance. She said she didn't want her Solomon to

go without a proper homemade meal. Eleven years of age, already fussing.

Suspecting that she ran away from home, Dad called up Eleanor at once. When she was on the line, she said that she had given Rachel her permission. The neighborhood of Sunview Heights was safe, and our two houses were but blocks apart. Moreover, said the cunning matron, it was a good arrangement for herself. Rachel, she explained, was much too restless. At home, she'd practice cooking in the kitchen when everyone was done with their supper. There was no greater crime than wasting food, and two chefs was too many for one kitchen. Don't worry, she assured, the girl's cooking would soon surpass her own.

And so, that night — and many nights thereafter — the Hawthorn son and father ate the meals that Rachel served them with a loving hand. Dad paid her for the groceries every time, and gave extra for her trouble. By middle school, she came by every day and had an upstairs room to herself. She got along with me and Dad, and with my mom when they crossed paths. My parents never bore another child, so Rachel was the closest thing to their own daughter they could hope to have.

She was the tallest girl in seventh grade, while I was short for boys my age. During those years, we really looked like aunt and nephew. The way she went about with airs, her chest puffed out, her chin held high, made her an adult in my mind. She dressed with class and style since she was young, a mark of her refinement and good taste. At school, she was mistaken for a teacher or a parent more times than I could remember. I found her pretty, and had some other thoughts along those lines; mostly, I felt ever more respect. She was a woman, while I was a boy. If you looked closely, she was but a child. But why think to look closely, when she was so self-assured? A year apart, in different generations.

How did the other kids see me and Rachel? As loving siblings, at the start. Things changed through the years. By middle school, some people started being mean. She was well-liked by others in her grade, but I was not so popular in mine. The boys in my grade said hurtful things about the weirdo cousins who were too close and clingy with each other. Of course, they also teased us over height — the giant girl and puny boy. Rachel gave no heed to petty insults, but for me it was a source of shame. When she moved on to high school, the year I spent in middle school without her was lonelier than any other year. She might be there when I got home from school, but during school I had no friends to play with.

At least they didn't tease me over Rachel, or over any other family members; they didn't tease me over anything, because I was invisible. Even back at home, there was someone who wasn't there as much as I'd have liked. My mom, the biggest hole inside my heart, was busy as ever with her work. At one point, I renounced her altogether. Instead of 'Mom', I'd call her by her given name to others. A habit which continues to today, though I've found better ways to soothe my pain.

So, yeah. A lot of things went down that year. It was a lonely year, but I was fine.

One year later, when I went to Rachel's high school, my cousin was responsible for the events that ended with the famous suicide that happened later in my senior year. You see, there was a necessary fact, without which nothing would've ever happened: I was a famous person at Sunview Secondary.

A big improvement from eighth grade, I know. Here's how it happened: during the first week, the first time Rachel saw me in the hallway, she marched right up and kissed me, that double peck we did ever since we saw it in a movie.

RACHEL SURRY

I've gotta go. I'll see you after class.

This caused a sensation. As it turned out, the brazen sophomore was way more popular than I'd imagined. Without me there the year before, she managed to impress her peers with her charisma and her sense of fashion. The students, residents of Sunview Heights, were all from families of means and stature, and yet they all deferred to Rachel Surry, my so-called aunt, for the season's trends. So when they saw that she had kissed a boy in the halls, they wondered: who could that person be?

It was because of that kiss on that day that I became well-known among the freshmen and even many of the upperclassmen as Rachel Surry's precious Solomon, her cousin for whom she'd do anything. The very thing that I was once ashamed of became my ticket to my prime of youth. (It helped that by freshman year, I had — at last! — grown taller than my cousin.)

Through my family connection, through not a single ounce of effort, I had a high school life that many dream of. My fame was secondhand, but that's okay. No matter what, I'm doomed to such a fate, to be a footnote in another's story.

No matter what, I'm a normal dude who knows a lot of better, greater people.

Dialogos

Alexander Shirley

I

We met at our department's Christmas party. I never met her, but she knew my name when we talked. I learned hers from a colleague, and acted normal when she was back from a phone call.

She invited me over on New Year's Eve. The next morning, she said the house was hers til Monday. We cuddled on her couch, and watched a cassette on the VHS in her living room. The film started halfway, and neither she nor the Internet had useful answers. I recall not the plot, except that the couple stayed not together.

"How sad," she said. "Good people deserve love."

"The universe is indifferent," I said. "Good and evil are nothing to the cosmos."

"Of course," she said. "Who cares what the world thinks?"

"The law of gravitation forces me," I said, and winked.

She laughed, and pulled me in for a kiss. "You earned it."

"What more wants a man than a woman's laugh?" I said, and tickled her.

She pretended to strangle me. "What could possess a man more than his death?"

"Life is a reaction to death." I held her down, and I forgot to Google the credits.

II

"Six thousand years ago, humans figured out the analogy of death."

She uttered it out of the blue, waiting not for me to face her.

"They saw others die, never themselves. They had to connect the dots."

"Like farm animals on YouTube," I said, and rolled over.

"The end terrified humans, and justified their works." Her head rested on my chest. "Stonehenge took three million man-hours to construct. Three and a half centuries of combined sweat and tears."

"Pyramids succeeded kings. Statues outlived gods." I smelled roses in her mess of hair. "Stone lives longer than we ever can."

She nestled closer. "Once, I walked on a gravel path in a small woods. Large rocks sat along the trail. They looked so heavy, yet someone moved and arranged them. Who, and by whose decision?"

“A public employee, under orders from a bureaucrat.”

“Futility, and vanity, and pride.” Her voice was gentle, but urgent. “I followed the path, and reached a meadow clearing. In the middle of the field was an enormous rock, larger than any other I saw that day. No one would bother moving something this big in one piece, and that’s how I knew it was in its rightful place.”

I thought about it, and agreed. “You belong if no one wants you there.”

“Unnecessary things are loveliest.” Her eyes glistened. “I sat atop that rock, and contemplated. Thinking back, it was the best day of my life.”

She said no more, and sang a pentatonic melody in a distant tongue.

III

In spring at a café, she wore a cardigan over a blouse, a skirt over tights. I praised her hair, and she smiled. “They fixed it at the salon,” she said, teasing her locks.

We found a corner table close to the front. Customers chatted around us, enjoying coffee and sandwiches, gossip and literary works. She told me she was planning a trip to Spain, the trip to end all Spain trips.

“I’ll see it all,” she said. “No stone unturned. I’ll die knowing I did all I could.”

Her sunglasses, balanced on her forehead, seemed to weigh her down.

“Check these out.” She lifted a leg from under the table, exposing stylish boots. “They were on sale earlier. Before I knew it, they were on my feet.”

Something about her makeup tipped me off. Upon closer inspection, I knew not who she was, the woman who finished her latte and sighed.

“Sorry if I’m boring you. Come on, say anything.”

I examined her. “What’s wrong?” I asked. “You can tell me anything.”

Her eyes were fixed on her cup, searching for something. Had I ruined everything? For two minutes, I regretted my impertinence.

In time, she looked up, more determined than ever. “Let’s go somewhere quiet.”

We paid, and left our cars on the side of the street. The walk to the park was peaceful, an unbroken song of traffic and street chatter. She and I said nothing, not till we were under a gazebo, sitting at a picnic table. There, she seemed more at ease.

“It’s so hard to say anything in loud places,” she sighed. “Large crowds hold a knife to your throat. Know what I mean?”

Her arms stretched to the sky, and a bird called in the distance.

“Did you mean it?” she continued. “Can I tell you anything?”

“Of course.” I looked at her, the girl by my side. “Anything.”

“I love you.” She kissed my cheek, and held my hand. “I have something to say. My mother died, the night of the Christmas party.”

Tide

Olivia Jian

Anna was the one. No one else was mine, and I was no one else's. Past bedtime, careful to not alert our parents, we typed with our cameras on. *I see you in my dreams.* She smiled at my message, unfastened one button on her polo shirt, and asked if I liked what I saw. I did, more than anything I could ever see, and told her so in hasty misspelled words. Her likeness became pixelated — damn my family's WiFi! — but the letters in our chat were crisp: *Be good to me, and I'm yours.*

The next day, she came over. We listened to recordings, and she joined my family for supper. Then, I worked up the courage to play the piano for her, and let her teach me. She left only when it was dark out. My mother was pleased to have a girl over, but asked: "Anna's parents let her stay out this late?"

"She's rebelling," I explained.

"Don't get any bright ideas," my father said from the living room.

I went over to her house once, and only once. Her mother asked about our walk, and Anna's sister Bella said we saw a rabbit at the neighborhood playground. Anna and I blushed, thinking about holding hands when the grade school girl was distracted. I was sweaty, but she laced our fingers. Hers were so long, so assured.

We hung out in her living room and played on her piano, a Yamaha U3 upright. She performed Grieg's piano sonata, her body dancing. She finished, and I gave a standing ovation. "I like yours better than Gould's," I said.

"You better." She stuck out her tongue, rose from the bench, and urged me to play. I complied, yielding my place in the armchair. My technique was haphazard, my inner voice naive. Under my touch, Mozart's variations were heavy, but also honest. My music was not good, but it was not false. I was too young, too wild, too innocent to lie. The naked truth was unashamed. I finished playing, and Anna touched my shoulder. I relaxed, and she kneaded my muscles.

"You're tight," she said. "Are you nervous?"

"Excited," I said, and rolled a chord. "I never knew a piano could feel like this."

"Everything's a Steinway compared to your Samick," she said, and waved her small hand. "You'd be a great pianist, if your parents got you a proper instrument."

"I'll be a doctor," I said. "What I have is enough."

The girl nudged me aside, and sat at the bottom register. "I don't want enough. I want everything."

Evil Days Redeemed

Aurora Vici

The girl stumbled, falling on her behind and dropping her bookbag. She made no effort to get up, staring at the vehicle screeching to a halt inches away.

“Nice going!” I yelled at Eroica before jumping out of the car. I ran to the girl, and offered my hand. “My mother’s a terrible driver. Are you hurt?”

The girl hesitated, and let me pull her up. She took a step, tripped over her own feet, and steadied herself against me.

Eroica drove up beside us and rolled down the passenger door window. My backpack flew out the open window, landing on asphalt. I flipped the bird at the lawyer as she ran the next stop sign.

“Is that normal for you and your mother?” the girl asked, calm and clear.

I answered with the truth: “Never get along, never plan to.”

A car honked, and we hurried off the road. On the sidewalk, the girl requested: “Care to join me for a stroll?”

The calls of geese rang through the backstreets near my high school. “This takes me back. I haven’t been here since the last day of school.”

“Did you come here often?” she asked.

“My friends use this path as a shortcut.”

“Friends. I see.” She trailed off, and we resumed our silence.

Awkward. I knew not even the name of the girl in the grey uniform. Speaking of which, what is she doing around these parts? “St. Maddie’s is far from here,” I noted.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “Today’s my first day of high school.”

A freshman, playing hooky on the first day? I held my tongue, and gestured to the plaza on King and University. “This is where WCI students hang out,” I said.

“I want to look around.” She ventured ahead, and I resigned to missing the opening assembly, standing by her as she cupped her hands around her eyes and peered into empty storefronts.

“Let’s sit in Starbucks,” I said.

The girl shook her head. “I have no money.”

“I’ll spot you a drink and snack.” If I was skipping, I wanted a table to finish that sonata analysis. So I hoped, but the girl refused vigorously.

“I can’t possibly accept that,” she said, gripping the strap of her book-bag. “In the first place, it’s not where I’m meant to be.”

“I don’t get it.” Seeing the girl’s shoulders slump, I added: “But walking is fine.”

On the other side, she barely glimpsed into the darkened windows of a liquor store and a sandwich bar. A popular bubble tea chain was also dismissed, though I recalled fun memories from last year.

“We were kicked out of this Chatime,” I said, pointing to where we were sitting. “My friend shot tapioca at me with a straw, and I threw one back.”

“Is that what normal high school friends do?” she asked.

“Not sure. In any case, the manager wasn’t impressed.”

The corners of her lips lifted politely, and I refrained from sharing more stories.

Our tour of the plaza was ending. As we passed by the last few windows, I did a double take. “This wasn’t here before.” I stepped out of the walkway and checked the sign above the entrance. Taped over the old sign of the former Japanese restaurant was a crooked white banner: SEPT 3 — FREE TEA @ 2PM!

“That’s everything,” the girl said with an air of satisfaction.

I nodded, but looked not away from the sign. “That’s all we got.”

“So many possibilities,” the girl mused. “How nice it would be to have all the time in the world, to explore these places with friends.”

Her wistful expression brought back insecurities from last year. In a place full of strangers, I feared relying on the company of Vesper. Only a week into freshman year, a boy in math class turned around and said: “I’m Conari. I hear you were a celebrity at your old school. Seems you’re good at math, too.”

I wondered who was the source of the rumors. Brushing that aside, I asked: “How do you know I’m good at math?”

Conari laughed. “Freshmen taking tenth-grade math? You two are special.”

Sitting next to us, my sister blushed from the handsome classmate’s praise. “Aurora Meyers,” I said. “She’s Vesper.”

Conari reached a hand over the back of his seat. “I know. Nice to meet you two.”

We twins ran around with Conari, helping him with student council duties. Olivia transferred to our school a few months later, and became the newest member.

I thought — hoped — that the four of us were inseparable. I persisted in this doomed faith, even when my sister's presence was ever more scarce.

Arriving home from an afternoon outing on the last day of school, I learned that my sister was transferring out. I was sure she would change her mind over the summer, but look where I was: alone, ditching the first day with an unknown girl. Never would this have happened, if Vesper were with me.

"Time to head back to school," I said to the girl, and started walking back.

Waterloo Collegiate Institute. Walking up the concrete stairs to the front entrance, I asked the girl in the Catholic school uniform: "Do you know the way back?"

"My phone has a GPS." She took a deep breath — inhale, hold, exhale — and spoke once more with that calm and clear voice: "Take me with you."

"I can't," I said.

The girl stared at her brown loafers. "I don't know anyone at St. Maddie's."

Sympathetic to her plight, I had an idea. "I have a twin sister. She transferred to St. Maddie's for this year. Take care of her, will you?"

The girl flinched as I clapped her shoulder. Her hair tickled my fingers.

"She was acting brave this morning, but I'm sure she could use a friend." I moved my hand away. "Remember her name: Vesper. Vesper Meyers."

"Vesper," she repeated.

"It was Grandma Elaine's idea." I waved my hand, embarrassed. "She wanted us to have matching names. Aurora and Vesper."

"Dawn and dusk." The girl bloomed into laughter. "I won't forget."

The girl hopped down the stairs, her bookbag bouncing up and down as she sped down to the bottom. Landing on her two feet, she called back:

"I hope you can meet my sister, too!"

I watched her cross the street, then headed up the rest of the stairs. I went in through the front entrance, and shivered in the foyer. In the girl's smile was a tinge of yellow. A touch of sunlight and honey, of hope and tragedy.

I found my way to homeroom, and forgot I never learned the girl's name.

Couplet Three

Gale Jones

Dorothy

We danced to the music, in a poised swing honed under many moons. Our feet moved to 'n' fro, near 'n' dear. Our hands touched — grazes at first, then palms. She linked our fingers, and I allowed her.

Before the song was over, we were kissing. Her parents were gone. We were alone, and no one could stop us. On the couch, she was a bundle of strawberry blonde hair and soft flesh. She locked her lips to mine. Her back arched as I moved up past her cocking waist. Her mouth gasped as I teased her bosom.

Her bosom was the earth, her eyes the stars. Those half-closed emerald eyes, they drove me crazy. What saw she as she took her ragged, ecstatic breaths? The ceiling, or the night sky past the chimney tops?

So I wondered as I explored her, seized her, knew her.

I knew her dearest secrets, but not her sweetest lies.

Grey

I write the following in twilight's midst: I love an architect named Tara Robles. We went out in our senior year of high school, and broke up in our second term of college. The split took place one winter night outside a theater. We were discussing plans for Valentine's when she said three words: "Let's break up."

"Sure." And so, our romance ended. The two of us switched out from our program, and kept no contact for the longest time.

Some years later, on a cloudy summer day, we crossed paths at La Ronde in Montreal. I was stood up by the love of my dreams, so Tara ditched her friends and spent the day with me. She was done with architecture school, and I was working at a small café, yet it was like nothing ever changed, as if we high school sweethearts awoke from where we lay in waiting. And on the Ferris wheel, our final ride, she asked: "Hey, Gale. Do you still love me?"

I mulled over that pressing question, and said: "I love the girl I used to know."

She laughed. "Good. I have a boyfriend."

"David," I said. "It's him. I know it is."

“It won’t last,” she said. “Nice as he is, it never is the same.”

We parted ways with hugs and kisses, but acted not on her covert suggestion. I called her five months later, and learned she was soon to be a mother to David’s son — my godson. They married when they found out she was pregnant, and figured out their problems as a team. This new development was devastating, but I told her: “Congratulations, Tara. Good for you.” I really meant it, too.

We kept in constant contact ever since. Our families are far apart, but close. I have three daughters of my own. The architect is welcome in our home, whenever she can take a break from work. Her job takes up her weekends far too often, but she makes time to read my newest writing and share it on her social media. Sometimes, I talk to David more than her. He knows about the day in Montreal — we told him everything — but we are friends. He often calls me up for crossword clues and for some small talk on the current news.

This is a happy ending, in a way. I love my fated bride, the love of my dreams; and Tara came to love her husband David. And yet, no love erases any other. She told me back at the amusement park that she knew not why she broke up with me outside the theater on that winter day. Those three words were a test, she said with sorrow. As soon as they came out, she hoped that I would not accept them. Yet, I quickly did. I wanted to respect her honest wishes, but she was not as honest as I thought. Or maybe I was ignorant of what those three words meant for her and me. Imagine if I stopped her with three words of my own: “I love you.”

That never happened, though. Instead, our love, our perfect passion, ended before it started. She wanted me, I wanted her; and yet we lost each other on the way. We were denied our happy ever after.

These days, when Tara Robles comes to mind, I think of all the things I still regret, of all the things I miss from time to time, of all the things I loved to death about her. To me, our love was grey, grey as the day we broke up in a theater parking lot, grey as the day we met each other again, grey as the day she married David Hawthorn, grey as the buildings she designs and builds, grey as the faded ink of crossword puzzles, grey as the years that quickly pass us by.

Twilight is almost over. Dawn approaches. My pen shall end this little fairy tale.

I listen to *The Wind at Dawn* by Elgar, a song I found when I was in my twenties and carried with me as a vow of sorts. I listen to the lyrics carefully, and hum along off-key to couplet three.

I see it now, the color of our love. I see it with my eyes and in my heart.

“And the earth was grey, and grey was the sky,
In the hour when the stars must die.”