

The Stars of Ventura Boulevard

If you were to cut me open like a sacrificial lamb, you could read the future in my intestines. You'd have to separate my skin from my peritoneum, skim the knife upwards and expose my chest. Cut through the diaphragm, snap the ribs, expose the lungs, and look. Let the gods be peaceful, you'd murmur, and then in the name of Shamash, seek truth in my lobes. What could they tell you, then, but what you sought to know?

It is in the light of the sun, once night is over, that every inhale makes my lungs tremble and become scarred with the omens of the day. They are omens for not much longer, as the day will pass and night will come again, so if you want to read them, you would have to strike quickly.

In the night things are simpler.

The hill I live on is high enough that the traffic lights below appear like stars. I chart them, as I must. The diaries I keep cannot be pressed into clay with a stylus, though my hands twitch and ache and yearn for it. I feel the veins inside constricting and screaming out in anger every time I attempt to hold a pen. But I must.

Because in the night I can't know that my mother's bakery is below me, that it dwells in the middle of a group of shops, that across Ventura Boulevard there is a store that has been and always will be banned to me. In that store are all the things my veins cry out for, but I cannot know that they are astrolabes and tablets, I cannot know that in my sight the wedges and dashes would rearrange themselves to something greater. I cannot know the styluses or clay, cannot know the diaries, cannot know the words.

In the night there is less to plead ignorance to.

But the night comes with other knowledge, other stars than the ones that are supposedly high in the sky above me. Police lights, blue red blue, passing by like comets. They wail and scream, but the sounds are thin and easily ignored from so far below me. There are traffic lights, red green yellow red, and flickering streetlights.

My star charts are not my own, and my mother takes them from me when the day comes. She gazes down at the comets and shooting stars, at the red green yellow red and blue red, and a small smile tugs at her mouth. If the charts are good, she might reward me with a croissant or muffin or two – stale from sitting the whole night and day on display. They are unwanted and uneaten until I get to them.

You can see them, if you like, when you cut me open. They won't be the same, but they'll be there.

You'll see other things too, because it is when I accept these offerings that I sense my liver paling, greening, broadcasting my guilt to any person with a knife sharp enough. Exposing it to you, if you would care to slice.

After I eat my muffin, I usually hide until I feel my liver going back to its typical dark shade. I might relax or sleep.

The same satellite waves that instruct a television can find me then, and fill my head with what I don't see. The news anchors chatting about robberies and money-laundering – excesses and abscesses and the rotting flesh of the underbelly sliced open for all to see. I don't see it until I cannot help to see it and unlike the night, I can know things so I can know that there is a bakery on Ventura Boulevard that has croissants and muffins and my mother's satisfied grin.

But I sleep so I see and I don't know.

If you wanted to cut me open, that'd probably be a good time, but I don't think you would find what you were looking for. The satellite waves might flow from me into you, but there are easier ways to find such things.

Yet you don't come, my belly is unscarred, and night falls upon me bruisingly, as it always does. I am on the balcony, squinting down at Ventura Boulevard, charting the stars that exist below me.

I know that tomorrow my mother will take the chart I make and grin down at it. That evening, no sign of her happiness will be present, aside from unmarked duffle bags and receipts from purchases that never occurred. I will gnaw on a muffin or two and my liver will pale, my lungs will scar, and I will wait for the sun to descend once more so I can see the stars and the sirens that accompany them.

Tonight I keep my eyes down and away from any reflections so that I cannot see what is above me. I chart what I chart and ignore that a pen feels so wrong. There is a cool breeze on my brow and splinters from the railing digging in. Sirens scream, I chart down their lights.

Somewhere above me, real stars are probably making their appearance. The moon is probably visible – judging from how light my surroundings are, it might even be full. Maybe. I don't know – I'll never look to make sure. Because there is too much to know in the night sky, with the moon and the stars – too much of the plan that can be seen and divined and charted. They dance and move and predict and so I keep my head down. Pen in hand.

In the night there is much to plead ignorance to.

Ah, here you are. Go ahead, but make sure it's sharp. It's so difficult to tear the skin away from the peritoneum without a sharp knife.