

Growing, blooming, wilting, repeating.

The cycle of flowers, the cycle of life. An absolute order, in a world of entropy. A world in which no matter the affairs and destruction wrought by the hand of man; nature shall always end our reign. After the last drop of blood has dried from the last beating heart, when the final breath has left the last remaining lung, the flowers will continue. The flowers will survive.

They may fade, they may wilt, they may die. They may perish for a thousand years and then a thousand more, but my time within the confines of this house have taught me much knowledge on this cycle that we are all sworn to repeat, and that is that nothing is ever truly gone, perhaps not in the same form, but it will return. No matter the hardship nor cost, life shall prevail, because it is the hope and will of all things to survive.

Perhaps it is the innate complexity of life, or the simplicity of death that allows such a survival. They are but two cogs in the same machine, two droplets from the same river, two roots from the same flower. That is what allows the cycle to repeat, and to give hope for continuation, hope that for what shall wilt, shall grow again.

My mother taught me those words. Taught me to respect the flowers, their lives, their language. She brought them into our home, and she nurtured them in their infancy as she did with me. She taught me to speak their tongue, to talk to them, to talk *with* them. She would walk me across the gardens and know each blossom by name as she greeted them, all with a smile that endured even the greatest of adversities. Each morning would bear witness to a sunrise that welcomed the flora that graced our grounds, and signalled the imminent arrival of both myself and my mother. She would chime to the peonies, respecting their timid nature; give her love to the honeysuckles, admiring their devotion; she even gave a formal acknowledgement to the hemlock that grew within their own confines.

It took me many years to ask the question of why we kept such a plant filled with death amongst a garden so devoted to life. Those were her words, simple and true, life and death are simply two roots of the same tree. We grow, we wilt, we grow again.

I don't remember much of my time with her, as much as it hurts to admit such a thing, I was simply too young to hold enough of those memories. I endeavour to remember her face, remind myself of her voice; but time is a cruel arbiter, and it has decided that some memories I simply cannot live with. Instead, those memories live through stories now, and through the journals my dearest mother left behind. A second-hand account of a life I was barely allowed to

touch. There is almost a cruel irony that here I sit, discussing those memories in my own journals. Perhaps she would find the humour in it.

These books taught me the things that she did not have time to teach; the harmony of nature, the true grace of each petal that flew across the green, the connected heart of the roots that run through the foundations of our home.

Each morning I still leave marigolds by her headstone; I like to think that they enjoy each other's company whilst they sing in the shade of the hawthorn trees. They sit together amongst the blades of grass and smile in the summer's sunlight, they rest in the winter's chill. I dream that every flower will see her grace this plane once more and sing a song of love as loudly as I would sing to her, and deep down I just hope that they will be truthful to her when she comes back to us; show her that I never stopped grieving, never stopped loving. That during the dark days and darker nights, I live by the hope that perhaps she is already here, that she is part of the flowers around me, that she grows within their stems and loves me through their petals. A lady of the flowers, a true goddess of her garden.

The hawthorns grow so prominently that I can see them from where I sit as I write this within my bedchamber. It always takes a second glance to remind myself that she is not really sat in the shade of their branches. They are standing proud amongst the grass of the cemetery, swaying calmly in the gentle breeze of spring. Lonely protectors, waiting for their friend to return home, waiting to hear the songs once more.

The hawthorns themselves are seen as a sign of hope, a symbol of return. There are days that I can smell the blossoms from here, if the winds align with the baring of the season, sometimes with such prominence that the scent follows me to my fondest of dreams, and darkest of nightmares.

But truly, there are very few things that do not follow into our nightmares, and even fewer that do not follow us out. They haunt us, they taunt us, corrode our very being until we can no longer bare the pressure of what we shall envision. It leaves me wondering if these halls really do house ghosts. Perhaps my mother is walking the corridors behind me, perhaps she sits next to me as I write. Perhaps my lineage binds to this house like the flowers we welcomed into it; twisting their roots through the decaying foundations that lay beneath my feet. They whisper, call out to me at times in subdued screams behind my ears, placing thoughts in me that are not my own. They talk of riddles and speak in tongues that I would have no hope of understanding.

It began in my nightmares. Visions of a scared little girl left at the harbourside, forgotten and alone. A crying child so lost and confused, begging for clarity, a child that at a time, was me.

I only need to close my eyes to see the world that froze around me, the cobbled streets all soaked in salt water, the sound of waves crashing against the jagged sea walls. My spirit leaves my body as it observes the town surrounding me, the waves stand in stasis as they touch the stonework of the coastal defences, birds hang motionless in the air above. As I gaze off into the horizon, I can see the ocean fall away into infinity, and the black void that sits beyond. I watch the scene unfold, with each second in a lifetime, and each lifetime an eternity to my tired eyes. My younger self stands helpless in a torrent formed by the crowds that surround us; an audience condemned to an unwilling play.

This is the day my sister abandoned me.

I move to place my hand on my former's shoulder, to give her the comfort that I could not receive, though my arms feel as though they wade through the ocean that lays motionless merely feet away. As I move closer, I can feel the anger, the confusion, the fear, the hurt. It seeps through the air like an aroma and pierces my soul like a blade. This is the moment I turned away, a fleeting second that ripped away a piece of me that I am still waiting to be returned. A riptide of emotions overcome me as I watch myself helplessly grapple with the feelings I have fought ever since. I can hear the voices of the townsfolk, they're asking questions and muttering to themselves, who is that child? Why is she here?

Their voices slowly warp into whispers, manifesting the distorted cries that have haunted me in every quiet moment since. The townsfolk begin to laugh, taunting the scared little girl crying for her sister as their faces begin to buckle and their bodies contort into the shapeless amalgamations of darkness that take residence in the corners of my vision. Their presence shifts through states of being as each shadow lumbers closer to my dual selves. Panic floods my senses whilst forms of pure nothingness reach out towards me.

My voice grants its greatest effort of mustering a scream, yet no words will leave my mouth. It is as if I am drowning; I am my lungs, and my body the ocean. My head turns to the sky, as I see the shimmer of light creep in from clouds above as the ripples in my vision wash them into waves. It only takes a blink for the blues of the sky to be replaced by the blues of the ocean above me, whilst the shadows beneath pull at my legs like seaweed.

The glimmer of sunlight leaves me in a trance. It is beautiful, peaceful, almost inviting. It takes moments before I return to my senses, and my concerns return to my mind. I look down once more to find myself floating in the empty abyss of the ocean, the darkness now surrounding me as an infinite void of empty space. I can feel the water fill my lungs; I can feel the life slipping from my veins.

In desperation I reach for my younger self, wading through the heavy ocean water, pulling against the pressures that fight against me. The darkness

below begins to rise, as the light is choked away from above. After struggle, and relief, I feel my hand grasp the hands of my former. It is not intuition that leads me, rather my instinct that pulls the girl towards me, and holds her tight within my grasp. My eyes lock with those of myself, her tears so effortlessly bleeding into each drop of the ocean.

The void begins to bleed into space, as the darkness swallows the last remaining glimmer of light that shines down upon me, I close my eyes and pray for the ending. The last light extinguishes, nothingness surrounds me.

And then, I open my eyes.

An endless cycle of my own, trapped within the twilight hours that creep throughout this cursed house. Waking, sleeping, dreaming, repeating. An absolute order, entangled within the entropy. Forced to endure the fabrics of these nightmares for every moment of which I try to rest, it is becoming difficult to draw the lines between walking the halls of the house of flowers and walking the house of nightmares.

I used to follow the scent of the hawthorns, I knew I could trust my senses, until I could not. Before that I would trust my memories of this house, until I could not. Now I trust my faith, but one day, I shall not. As these halls twist and distort each night whilst I wander the lucid corridors, I am dragged to every hellish moment of my life like the needle of a gramophone pulled to the scratch of a record. I can see the day my mother died, the day my sister left me. I can see every waking hour that I was moulded into the person that I did not wish to be.

I can see it all, moments folding upon moments, the incursion of trauma within memories of normality; an endlessly repeating presentation of what was, what is, and what I am expected to become. It is like a kaleidoscope pointed towards the midnight stars, eclipsing the lonely void that encapsulates us all. Except, within this realm, this house, this nightmare, that void only surrounds me.

An empty wall, a hollow plane, an infinite enclosure so impossibly presented that I cannot begin to comprehend any means of escape. So, I make the only logical choice.

I walk.

I haunt the lonely halls of this empty house waiting for the moment where I can awake, only to walk them once more.

I gaze inwards through a doorway presented as a wall, perceived as a window and experienced as if falling through a lake on a cold winter's morning. My mind races through the freezing abyss, yet I still feel so tired. Tired of

drowning, tired of running, tired of watching. My feet land on the wooden floors of my father's study, he is stood with my uncle, they are both moving their words onto me.

My steps do not echo, they barely leave a trace as I walk towards myself once more. I am older here; the years show on my tired eyes. There is no reaction as I stand between the others within the room, observing my own weary face. The girl in front of me looks no more than eighteen years old, yet her eyes tell of years beyond her skin.

The room is hazy. Things appear out of place as I continue to observe; fragments of history that should not exist at this point in time, and pieces that were long since gone from this moment. Time is playing tricks on me, and in this nightmare state, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate my reality from distorted fantasy.

I narrow my thoughts. This is the day my father left our house and left me as its sole guardian. The final nail in our family's coffin, and the final lock to place me in this prison.

That knowledge is my anchor, it grounds me enough to see the discrepancies left in this wretched place. My father is talking to me, he stands next to the medical papers that are confirming his death several years later. They do not belong here. He stands with my uncle, who listens to each word as he holds a shattered time piece, a timepiece that was lost when I was still a child, never to be recovered. Even the paintings hanging from the ill-papered walls are incorrect, they depict events that never happened, or perhaps, are yet to happen, phasing between reality and misconception.

One painting shows the first bouquet my mother crafted for the house, a brilliant arrangement of lilies, honeysuckles and forget-me-nots. Each stroke of the brush was masterfully placed to display the stunning beauty of my mother's work. At the blink of an eye it transforms, the vibrant yellows and blues replaced with the dark browns and blacks of a wilting garland. The quality of the brush work remains, but the joy has been taken, replaced with the melancholy of a lonely painter.

Across from the lonely portrayal of the bouquet is another painting; the greenhouse that sits at the back of our residence. The sunlight shines in through the glass panels, and each individual plant sings with a coruscating beauty. The oil on the painting feels alive, each stroke moves in a breeze and the petals dance on the wind. Their forms gracefully move around the frame, before contorting into vines and weeds. Within seconds the greenhouse is overrun by thickets and thorns, flowers wilt and the sunlight recedes out of view. All that is left is a single bloom in the centre of the frame, a red blossom, emanating a cold blue aura of light into what is now a dark, empty ruin of its former self. I can't help but be drawn to it; a scene so sad, yet so fascinating.

The next is a painting of my mother and father. It flickers between them and the portrait of another with each movement of my iris. At a glance I see my parents smiling, happy, locked in each other's arms, and then, I see my uncle. He stands alone, his hair greyed, and his skin wrinkled. His eyes gaze past the portrait as if they long for something else that has been left behind. The room in which he stands is the same as I stand in now, except it has succumbed to the passage of time. Where there were once grand oak bookshelves, well-polished and sturdily built, now stood old, dishevelled planks of rotting woodwork, paper torn from the pages of books scattered about the floor. The ornate chandelier than hung from the ceiling now shattered on the floor, each glass crystal refracting beams of dreary sunlight across the room. He stands in the ruins of this very house, wilted and rotten.

I place my hand on the painting, feeling pity for my uncle. The paint runs down my arm, and bleeds out onto the walls, transforming the room around me as I watch my own body turn into canvas. Stroke by stroke the room deteriorates further, my father and uncle fall to their knees and crumble to dust as the wood beneath their feet begins to rot. The entire room begins to creak and groan as the foundations shake beneath me. I close my eyes, bracing for the weight of the rafters above my head to give way and fall atop my body. The wood screams as splinters snap, and I am buried beneath the walls of our home.

I open my eyes and I awaken once more. I am stood in the hallways of the house, staring down an endless hallway twisting upon itself for as far as the eye can see until it reaches its own horizon. I trace my steps with each foot as I venture down uncanny hallways, decorated with failed paintings, family portraits that never were, memoirs of a life not lived. Each step pulls me further, as if a chain was tied across my waist. Its pull could not be avoided, nor could it be contested. I could simply allow it to drag me further in.

I can see the day my mother died. The first time I saw my father cry, the last time I saw my mother smile. I can see the funeral, the day she was buried in the cemetery grounds, the day we planted the hawthorn trees. Their fragrance is still strong even now. I take each step, one foot forward yet my feet are pulled back. I am not moving within this place; the place is moving within me. I take another step; I hear the echoed motion of my heel against the wooden planks of our long empty hallways. I take another step; I hear the soft crunch of grass beneath my feet. I take another step; I feel the fragrant air of the hawthorn trees flare into my nostrils as I walk amongst the gravestones within the cemetery.

I walk amongst the emerald blades as I watch clouds roll in overhead. The morning sun fades behind black storm clouds, and the gentle breeze comes to a slow and painful cease.

I walk amongst the evergreen grassland as I watch every raindrop wash away the colour from each pasture, drop by drop. The rich shades of green fade to grey, the vibrant pinks of the hawthorns seep into white as their colours bleed into the blackened soil. The earth turns bleak, the air turns dull.

I walk amongst the ashen grass, each step I take pulling a deep hazy fog on my heel, wiping away everything that lay behind me. It eats away at the surroundings, corrodes every sign of living. I can feel the arms behind the haze reaching out towards my back, grasping at the back of my neck, pulling at my feet. I hear their whispers in my ear, as if they talk beneath my skull. I dare not cast my eyes behind me, for I fear what I may see.

My mother's grace lays ahead, I can see her stood above the headstone that holds her name. This is not in my mind, this is real. Her body is stood amongst the trees, her arms outstretched towards me. I focus on her, I focus on her embrace. I push to hurry my step as I work my way towards her open arms. Her smile continues to widen, uncomfortably so, her body is no longer amongst the trees, it is becoming one with the trees. Her limbs contort, warping with the fog. Her features grow unrecognisable as her arms form branches from her fingertips and her legs implant like roots. She is no longer here, simply another tree within the forest.

The scenery dissolves once again, each leaf turns to dust, and each grain of dust erupts into a colourless butterfly. They flutter around me, they surround me, they drown me. And endless metamorphosis, from tree to leaf, leaf to dust, dust to wings, wings to nothing. I am left standing in the empty void once more.

I open my eyes. I am in an unfamiliar place. Clad with carved stone and unknown runes, where vines run deep across two moons. A ruin, a temple, a prison. Aged pillars hold up a grand cavern, a waterfall sings an echo in the distance, gentle embers dance from torchlight. My feet take hold atop an altar, and I stand my ground. My position is surrounded by hooded figures. They chant, and they sing, they look at me in confusion, in horror, in amusement? I cannot tell; their faces change with each blink of the eye. Vines wrap around my feet and implant me to the ground beneath as I try to shout into the darkness to no avail.

I throw my eyes across the darkness that entombs me with this cult of empty robes. I stare at the ruined columns holding up a ceiling of cavered rock as plant life erupts from every crack and crevice, growing virulently at speeds I fear I would never outrun.

One by one each of the hooded figures begins to stiffen. Their flesh tears and bones break as bodies become bark. Chanting erupts into screaming and dies out into crying. The plant life begins to overtake the figures surrounding me, they become entrapped by them, before becoming a part of them. Each cry rattles as it diverts into the creaking of wood whilst twigs pinch outward from fingertips and leaves erupt from open mouths.

Before long I am left alone once more as a crowd becomes a forest, and I sit in its grove. Twisted forms of ancient oak trees stand tall in the darkness, their branches wave at me like limbs and point at me like fingers. They are as much trees as the hawthorns growing in our graveyard, yet these feel more alive than any other I have come across. I remain vigilant, peering out past the taunting bark of the oak entrapments.

It is there in the shadows I can see it. A figure. A distortion. An apparition. It blends with the stone walls, wraps itself around the vines that lay beneath it. My eyes cannot fully perceive it, but I can still feel its presence. It distorts the space around itself, as if gravity originates from its glare. Those red eyes, piercing. They can see me, they can see within me, down to my very soul.

I try to run, but my feet are sealed within the stone floors. My heart is pounding, my lungs are burning. The creature pulls itself from the darkness, shadows drip from its twisted limbs like raindrops. The light reveals its face to me, shifting and contorting with each blink of the eye. It bares the face of my mother, then the face of my sister, then the face of my father, and the face of my uncle; it takes the forms of faces I have long since forgotten, and the faces of those I am still fated to meet, until finally, it takes the face of me.

I stare back at myself, watching thousands of subtle emotions cross through my duplicated visage within moments of each other. Anger bleeds into sadness morphs into happiness descending into doubt twisting into agony binding into despair erupting into joy burrowing into fear collapsing into anguish twitching into madness. The creature stares at me, impossible to read, its facial features impossible to perceive as I try to keep pace with the portrayal of my own emotions. It reaches a broken limb out towards me; a snapped branch slowly enveloped by vines and leaves. It pulls itself together to form a vague inhuman resemblance of an arm, and unholy manufactured horror made as a dark replication of the original. It gently strokes my face; I feel the cold bark scratch my cheek.

I take a heavy breath; a tear runs down my face. In a state of fear, I try to close my eyes, but my eyes force themselves to remain open; facing the predator that holds me as its prey.

The creature screams at me, with an unidentifiable tongue, yet an undeniable rage. I feel the coldness of its limbs as a wooden tendril pierces my chest.

My breath begins to slow. My heart begins to race. As the creature rips its appendage from my body, I can feel each individual splinter lodge itself underneath my skin. The warmth of my blood reaches the coldness of my flesh. I close my eyes, only to look back at myself. My arms turned to timber; my flesh turned to bark. I watch the saturation wash away from me, the only colour left is crimson.

I open my eyes. My vision is becoming blurry, the air is becoming thick. I stare upwards, towards the face of my ending, the face of myself. I can see sadness in my sombre smile, regret is in my eyes. The surroundings darken with a great intensity as I feel my consciousness leaving my body. My eyes close, the warmth disappears, the void welcomes.

All is dark. All is cold.

I open my eyes.

I am led in my bedchamber.

The warm amber sun bleeds in through the curtains, the scent of hawthorn is carried on the breeze. I can hear the birds singing as I pull myself from the soft comfort of the linen covers and up towards my dresser. The mirror holds true, it reflects reality. The tiredness in my eyes, the cut on my cheek.

There is a shadow that hangs over this place. One that seems to follow each and every one of us no matter how far we may try to run. My grandparents tried to hide from it, yet they succumbed, my parents tried to face it, yet they were felled, my sister tries to run from it, but eventually we are all drawn back to the empty halls of the house of flowers. The visions, the twisted rooms and the broken legacy that still sits upon our shoulders to this day.

I did not ask for my legacy, I did not ask for the entropy, I did not ask to be branded in the house of the butterfly. But, that is what awaits when you are a child of this house; expectations, mourning, and regret.

I did not ask for my namesake, nor the expectance of a grand reveal, an opening act that shall enthrall an audience for such a fierce moment that they cling to your every word thereafter. I did not strive for the expectation that you shall earn their approval in one clean cut. The expectation of survival.

I did not ask to be haunted; I did not ask to be hunted.

But something within these walls appears adamant on playing that role, so I too must shoulder the weight of playing mine.

Each morning I shall awaken and tread steps within the house of flowers, and each evening I shall walk that very path once more within the house of nightmares. I shall attend to the azalea and oleander that sit atop my dresser and long to remember what I had been told in my hours asleep.

Perhaps one day these nightmares will stop, and I shall be granted clarity, perhaps one day I will finally understand what led me into this shallow hell.

My name is Sophia Costera Euthalia.

Born to the house of the Euthalia, haunting the house of flowers. The scared little girl with the butterfly's wings, bound to a legacy and trapped to a home. Every occasion of the moons rising, I have come to believe that these

nightmares shall overtake me, that the voices that haunt me shall drag me deep beneath the realm of the waking mind. Each night I hope for it to finally end, and be granted a peaceful rest.

Yet here I am, still awaiting an ending.

Still walking the halls of this house of nightmares.

Yet here I am, still retelling my story.

Yet here I am.

Awake.