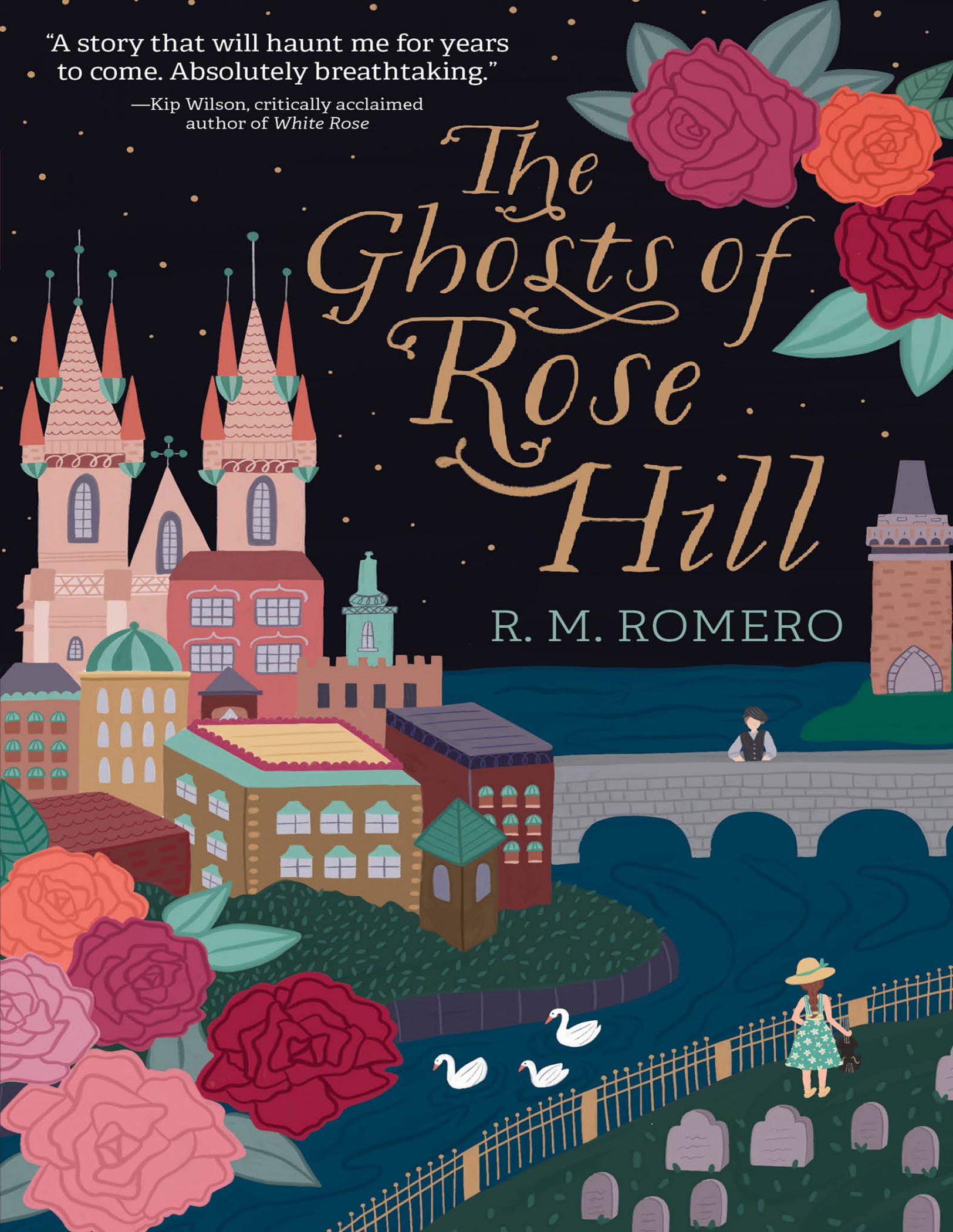


"A story that will haunt me for years  
to come. Absolutely breathtaking."

—Kip Wilson, critically acclaimed  
author of *White Rose*

# The Ghosts of Rose Hill

R. M. ROMERO



For Jacob and Miriam, who led me out of the woods

—R. M. R.



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R. M. ROMERO

*The  
Ghosts of  
Rose  
Hill*



PEACHTREE  
*Teen*



“She made herself stronger by fighting with the wind.”

—Frances Hodgson Burnett

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First Movement:  
***The Golden City***

# Chapter One

**The city I was born in**  
embraces each person  
who steps off the mainland  
and onto the island  
known as Miami Beach.  
It understands  
we have nowhere else to go.

A dozen countries  
converge here;  
languages tangle  
like bright ribbons  
in the humid air.

Nearly everyone  
on the island is an expat,  
a survivor of a tragedy  
that swallowed their family  
and nation  
whole.

So the last thing I expected  
was to be exiled  
by my own parents.

**When my grades**  
in math and science  
slipped  
last semester,  
when my PSAT score  
was less than ideal,

my parents blamed:  
my best friends,  
Sarah and Martina,  
the parties  
I sometimes went to,  
my obsession  
with playing the violin.

They even asked  
if I was sneaking around  
with a boy.  
I swore I wasn't;  
they didn't believe me.

Dad scowled  
as he looked over  
my report card;  
Mom raised her voice  
like a fist  
as she lectured me.

*I almost named you Marisol,  
because the sea gave me freedom—  
the freedom to do  
and say whatever I like.  
I studied hard;  
la pluma no pesa—  
the pen has no weight.  
You must do the same.  
Do not waste  
what the sea and I  
have given you!*

I'm glad

she didn't name me  
after the ocean—  
it's much too powerful.  
I'm just a girl  
who dreams about magic  
and can't wrap her mind  
around algebraic equations.



## Chapter Two

**My mother's family,**  
Lopez,  
came from Cuba.

Lopez means:  
son of Lope,  
son of wolf.

But it's the Lopez *women*  
who have always howled the loudest.  
They had to be fierce  
and stubborn  
to survive.

**My great-grandmothers**  
(may their memories  
be a blessing)  
mastered the art of escape  
seven generations  
before my mother.

They fled the pyres  
(the flames  
fueled by hatred)  
devouring  
the street corners,  
synagogues,  
cemeteries  
of Spain,  
crossing the ocean  
with their faith

and Shabbat candlesticks  
tucked under their skirts.

I wonder  
if they understood  
their ancestors would leave Cuba  
    with its sunset-colored buildings  
    and blue skies as soft as whispers  
the same way.

### **When Castro**

    (and his communists)  
rose to power,  
he waved his cigar like a magic wand.  
Whenever he did,  
poets and gossips,  
friends and neighbors  
disappeared,  
taken by men who prowled  
through the night.

Mom understood  
what happened to those who vanished,  
how their bones were planted  
in fields of rice  
and sugarcane.

Not wanting to be among them  
    (and knowing one day  
    she might be)  
Mom fled her island,  
letting the water carry her  
and her little fishing boat  
away to a new life

with nothing  
but the dress she wore to her name.

**Like a queen of Narnia**

who couldn't go back  
through the wardrobe,  
Mom knows  
she'll never return to Cuba again.

She'll be in exile  
forever.

**My parents decide**

they'll be sending me to live  
with my aunt Žofie  
in Prague  
    the golden city  
    of a hundred towers  
    and a thousand stories  
for the summer.

They think  
if I'm away from Miami  
    (and all its distractions)  
I'll study more seriously  
for the college admissions exams  
looming  
in my future.

The bargain is this:  
in the fall,  
I must earn 1300  
    (or above)  
on the SAT.

Mom and Dad  
see that score as a silver key;  
it will grant me access  
to the best colleges,  
the largest scholarships,  
the brightest future.

But if my score is any lower,  
there will be  
    no more music lessons  
    or weekend outings  
until it improves.

**At first,**  
my father raged  
like a September storm  
at the idea of banishing me  
to the city  
he grew up in.

He told my mother:  
*Žofie lives her life  
on top of bones!  
The communists are gone,  
but what they did with  
    their tanks,  
    their lies and laws,  
    their secret police  
can't be erased.  
I haven't been back  
in almost thirty years.  
I'll never go back again.*

Mom said: *You and I*

*didn't survive  
dictators of flesh and blood  
so we could live  
in fear of ghosts.  
And you're lucky—  
your daughter can visit  
the place you were born  
and be safe.*

She won the argument  
by virtue of being right.  
(She usually does.)

**June, July, and August**  
lie ahead,  
three months  
without my friends  
or my violin.  
I'm being separated  
from everyone,  
*everything*,  
supposedly leading me  
down  
the wrong path  
in life.

I tell myself:  
my friendships will survive  
a single summer away.  
Sarah, Martina, and I  
can still talk  
every day.

But how will I live

without  
my music?



## Chapter Three

**The night before I leave,**  
I meet Sarah and Martina  
at the bus stop to say goodbye.

Their parents send them  
to the New World School of the Arts,  
where they study  
cello, opera,  
how to transform  
strings of notes on a page  
into tales about:  
    swan girls,  
    queens of night,  
    and wolves  
    with wild intentions.

I begged  
Mom and Dad to let me attend  
the same high school.  
I wanted nothing more  
than to study music,  
play violin,  
be with my friends.

But they refused.

Music,  
my parents said,  
won't put food on the table.  
Music,  
they said,

won't give me the kind of life  
they so desperately want  
for me.

They believe  
we can hold  
safety and security  
in our hands,  
building it  
    one degree,  
    one car,  
    one house  
    at a time.  
Only when our roots are stone  
will we be safe.

**My friends and I**  
flee the packs of tourists  
drinking up the neon glow  
of Ocean Drive  
and race down to the beach.

But by the time  
we reach the water,  
I'm already  
    outside  
their conversation.

Sarah and Martina  
will spend their sixteenth summers  
here in Miami Beach,  
chasing songs and kisses,  
making memories  
steeped in wondrous colors.

But I won't share  
any of their adventures.  
I'll only see them captured  
in pictures and videos,  
with an ocean between us.

I wade into the waves  
as my friends chatter away.  
All I can do  
is float—  
I've been left behind  
by them.

(Again.)

**For as long as I can remember,**  
I've written letters in sea foam  
to the mermaids  
I once believed  
swam just off the shore.

For years, I asked them:

*Do you hide when the hurricanes come?*

*Do you pray to the tides?*

*Do you fight sharks with your teeth and tridents?*

*What's it like, to be you?*

They never answered.  
Mermaids  
are terrible correspondents.

Still, I let my words  
drip  
down  
my fingers,

bitter with salt.

**My final letter, before departure:**

*Did the sea ever swallow up your songs?*

*Have you ever let*

*a human boy*

*pluck them off your tongue*

*and carry them up to the sun?*

*Did your mother or father*

*ever take your music away,*

*like my parents took mine?*

*PS*

*I know I can always count*

*on your silence.*

*It's my own*

*I'm not used to.*

**Being trapped**

inside an airplane

(thirteen hours to Prague,

with one transfer in London)

allows me to sink into

*Tallis Fantasia*

(Vaughan Williams, 1910)

on my headphones.

I ignore the exam workbooks

I should be reading;

the curtain of stars

we soar through

captures my attention entirely.

If only I could keep flying

and never

touch the ground  
again.



## Chapter Four

**Aunt Žofie comes to find me**  
in the gray airport terminal.  
I barely recognize her;  
we've only met  
in person  
once before.

(But her two-week visit to Miami  
contained a lifetime's worth of arguments  
with my father.)

*You'll enjoy your summer here,*  
Aunt Žofie promises me,  
slinging my bag  
over her shoulder  
as if it's no heavier  
than a dust mote.

*I know my brother*  
*expects you to do nothing*  
*but study.*  
*He didn't want you to come*  
*in the first place.*

*But Prague is a place*  
*where a girl your age*  
*can find herself.*  
*I'll let you have your freedom,*  
*as long*  
*as you're careful.*  
*We're very much alike,*

*you and I.*

I doubt that.

Aunt Žofie is a storm  
who only pretends to be a woman.  
Her hair drifts above her head,  
a cloud of thoughts  
and enchantments.

And according to my parents,  
I'm a doctor, lawyer, engineer, architect  
in waiting,  
one who hasn't quite grown  
into a practical future  
without music.

(Or mermaids.)

(Or magic.)

**Aunt Žofie calls her house Růžová Chata:**

Rose Cottage.

It sits on Růžová Kopec:

Rose Hill.

But if you looked on a map,  
you wouldn't find either of them.

She speaks  
Czech  
and English,  
Russian  
and German.

But sometimes  
I can't understand  
a single word

she says.  
Her heart's language is a mystery  
I can't solve.

**There's no order**

to Rose Cottage's four rooms,  
which makes it the opposite  
of my own home.

The walls  
are pitted and cracked.  
My aunt's chairs bleed stuffing  
when I sit on them.  
Her computer is a relic,  
built before I was born.  
Jars of paint compete for space  
with crumpled sketches,  
oceans of dust,  
and books fattened by poetry.

As I stare,  
Aunt Žofie tells me:  
*My home  
may not look like much,  
but I have everything I need!  
I can visit museums  
whenever I like.  
I can walk to the library  
where the walls are painted  
with the stars  
of a hundred constellations  
and every book  
invites me inside.*

I wonder  
if the real reason  
my parents sent me here  
is to see how humble  
the life of an artist is.

**My father's and Aunt Žofie's stories**  
diverged  
when they were only a little older  
than I am.

Dad became a scientist in America.  
His world is made up of:  
    atoms,  
    particles,  
    waves.

Aunt Žofie became an artist in Prague.  
She makes her *own* world filled with:  
    faeries,  
    river spirits,  
    and queens.

Maybe brothers and sisters  
must always contradict each other  
so that the world  
stays in balance.

**I wouldn't know anything**  
about siblings.  
I have no brothers;  
my only sisters are the friends  
I won't see  
until September.

And Martina and Sarah  
haven't reached out  
since we left the beach  
and they started their own adventure  
together.

Without me.



## Chapter Five

### **The sun pulls me from my bed**

my second morning in Prague.  
I follow the light  
into Aunt Žofie's garden,  
where hundreds of roses bloom.  
They come in shades  
of cotton-candy pink  
and vivid red,  
like kisses.

I climb the hill  
behind the cottage,  
a prayer  
drifting  
through my head.

*(We praise You,  
Eternal God,  
Sovereign  
of the universe,  
who creates fragrant flowers  
and herbs.)*

### **By the time I reach the top of the hill**

(Rose Hill)  
the backs of my legs  
burn like the sunrise  
splashed across the sky.

From here, I can see:  
the blue walls of Rose Cottage,  
a dark snake of concrete road,

the black towers of Prague Castle,  
the arch of Charles Bridge  
spanning the Vltava River,  
which flows all the way to Austria.

I fling my arms out,  
trying to gather the city  
in my hands.

**Behind me is a grove of trees.**

The alders and ash  
devour  
the pink light of dawn;  
the wind  
makes them laugh and shiver.

I venture into the little wood.  
Any secret I bury  
between these trees  
would never find its way out.

In the gloom of the forest,  
an old stone rises  
from the ground.  
A lion is carved on its rough face,  
his mouth open  
in a silent roar.  
Ropes of ivy and moss  
crawl  
up his sides,  
the green cloak of a once  
and future king.

*What are you?*

*Who put you all the way up here?*

I ask the great cat.

The lion must know  
what my history books forgot,  
but time  
has swallowed his voice.  
He doesn't answer;  
he can't.

### **The greenery**

ensnaring the stone is an invader;  
it conquered Rose Hill  
long before I was born.  
But I want to see the lion  
in all his glory.

I struggle,  
trying  
to pull the vines away.  
As I move, my ankle  
bumps  
against something solid.

It's another stone,  
this one made of white marble.  
I shift  
lost October leaves from its base,  
exposing letters  
I've been learning  
since I was a child.

*Yud.*

*Ayin.*

*Aleph.*

Hebrew.

I whisper:

*You were Jewish.*

*Like Mom.*

*Like me.*

**There aren't many Jews left in Prague;**

the Shoah

(the greatest shipwreck

of our People)

stole them away,

leaving their books,

their songs,

their stories behind.

But the Jews of Prague

are all around me here.

Their dust grows up

through the earth;

their hands reach for me.

This is a *cemetery*,

I realize.

And I don't think anyone remembers

it's here.

Anyone

except

for

me.

**I feel eyes moving over me**

as I trace

the letters on the headstone—  
the *matzevah*.

I stumble back,  
asking the alders:  
*Hello? Ahoj?*

The woods  
refuse to speak.  
But I'm not alone.

There is a boy  
standing between the trees.  
His eyes are the blue of the sea  
I left behind.  
He's taller than me  
and slim as a birch rod  
with soft dark curls  
I want to wrap my fingers around.  
We must be the same age.  
My voice is more certain now.  
*My name is Ilana.*  
*Do you live nearby?*  
*Do you know my aunt Žofie?*

The boy pulls back  
like the tide.  
Now I wish  
I hadn't shouted.  
I take a step forward,  
but the boy is gone  
in a flicker of my lashes,  
leaving the shadows  
settling like crows

in the space  
where he stood.

***I saw a boy,***  
*on top of Rose Hill,*  
I tell Aunt Žofie  
when I return to the cottage.  
My heart has crawled up my throat;  
I'm so excited  
I can barely breathe around it.

*Did he have blue eyes?*  
My aunt  
holds a chipped teacup  
between two fingers,  
like it, too, is one of her many  
paintbrushes.

(I can tell her mind is only  
half  
with me.  
The rest of her is a permanent resident  
of Fairyland,  
where the borders are closed  
to nearly everyone.)

When I nod, Aunt Žofie says:  
*I've seen him too.*  
*He used to live near here, I think.*  
*Although he hasn't lived anywhere*  
*for a long time.*  
*I'm surprised he let you see him at all.*  
*Having a ghost*  
*is like having a cat.*

*They wander where they like  
and won't come  
when you call.*

***A ghost?***

The word sparks  
on my tongue.  
*That makes sense—  
there's a Jewish cemetery  
at the top of Rose Hill.  
Did you know that?*

There's a story  
printed  
in Aunt Žofie's gaze,  
but it's in a language  
I haven't learned to read.

(Yet.)

*I knew the stones there  
held some meaning.  
But I've always preferred  
not to climb the hill myself.  
I don't care for ghosts.*

***Could I clean the cemetery a little?***

*Trim back the trees,  
make the matzevot visible again?*  
I hold my breath,  
expecting to be exiled  
from the graveyard  
as I was exiled from Miami.

Aunt Žofie sets her cup down.  
*I'm not Jewish—you are.*

*That gives you a connection  
to the cemetery  
that I'll never have.  
You should do  
whatever you think is right.  
But wear gloves  
and be careful, Ilana.  
Keep your head down  
as you work.  
Don't talk to the ghost boy  
again.*

*I can't help but ask:  
Why not?*

*Aunt Žofie squeezes my hand.  
I appreciate Prague's magic.  
I paint it  
each and every day.  
But not all magic is safe,  
and there are things here  
far worse  
than ghosts.  
By speaking to the dead,  
you might draw them to you.*

*Let the boy on the hill go;  
let him move on.  
You don't belong in his world  
and he has stopped belonging  
in ours.*

**The boy and his death**  
don't unsettle me,

regardless of what Aunt Žofie says.

Most of the stories  
Mom and Dad tell me  
are ghost stories.

So why wouldn't I want  
to talk to the dead?

**If I were in Miami, I'd know**  
what to do  
for the boy on Rose Hill.

I'd know  
whether he'd want me  
to find ten men  
and say Kaddish.

I'd know  
if I should offer a prayer  
to the Orishas—  
Yemoya,  
Oko,  
Osanyin,  
    (who live  
    in the water  
    and the soil)  
on his behalf.

I'd know  
if I should feed him  
bread and sugar,  
as if his soul  
were a hummingbird,

swift and bright.

But I don't know anything  
about the boy in Prague,  
except the color of his eyes.

Tomorrow morning  
when the world is cool and misty,  
I'll climb the hill  
and tend to the *matzevot*.  
The dead boy's name  
must be engraved on one of them.

I want to know it;  
then it can be a blessing.  
Then I can remember him  
the right way.



## Chapter Six

**Aunt Žofie needs art supplies;**

I need gardening gloves  
to fight  
the cemetery's stinging nettles.  
We leave Rose Cottage  
and walk toward the city center  
in search of both.

My aunt tells me about Prague  
as we cross Charles Bridge,  
watched by the statues of saints  
(black with coal dust and age)  
neither of us  
put our faith in.

*Prague's always confusing itself.  
It doesn't know  
what's part of its true history  
and what is a story  
people tell about it.*

*It can't remember  
if it was built by travelers  
or a woman named Libuše  
who could see the future,  
if Rabbi Loew was a scholar  
or a magician  
who made a soldier  
out of clay  
to protect  
the Jewish people here.*

*It doesn't know  
if the birch groves are silent  
or if they're full of vila—  
enchanted women  
whose beauty  
haunts  
the minds of foresters.*

*Prague believes in magic.  
Prague believes in itself.*

(I wish  
I could be more like Prague.)

**Dad never tells stories like Aunt Žofie's**  
when he mentions Prague.  
Every word that leaves his mouth  
about the city  
is newsprint gray.

When I was younger, he said:  
*The communist government  
demanded  
we all believe  
the same things,  
cultivate  
the same dreams.  
If we defied them,  
they stole our voices  
and what little freedom  
we had.*

*I wanted a future  
I couldn't have in Prague.  
I wanted more than breadlines*

*and secrets.  
So I ran,  
trying to make myself  
into a ghost, unseen and unheard,  
as I walked to freedom  
through Austria.  
Then I came here, to America.  
A refugee.*

I nodded along  
with this sad tale.  
If I closed my eyes,  
I thought I could feel  
the echo of Dad's journey  
out of Prague  
in my own bones.

Maybe  
my father is still running from Prague.  
Maybe  
my mother is still fleeing Havana.  
Maybe  
my entire family is still trying to escape history.

(But if that's true,  
what am I doing here,  
drowning in it?)

**The buildings that block out**  
the morning sun  
in the city center  
are older than any in America.

Bullet holes are visible

on the doorways,  
old wounds  
in need of healing.  
Bottles of absinthe glow,  
green as Rose Hill's forest,  
in dusty shop windows.  
Posters in gleeful electric colors  
promise dance clubs  
full of beautiful boys,  
glittering girls,  
music guaranteed  
to set a person's soul alight.

Martina and Sarah finally write back  
after I send them photos  
of all the forbidden things  
at my fingertips.  
For the first time,  
they're jealous of *me*.

But I don't want to chase  
the green fairy  
or lose myself  
in the arms of a stranger  
after dark.

There's only one thing  
I want now.  
And no one  
    (not even Prague itself)  
can give me a lifetime of music.

**The earthy smell of Turkish coffee**  
welcomes us inside a café

hidden away  
between the houses and museums  
where the centuries  
blur together.

The walls are whipped-cream white;  
the tiles lemon custard yellow.  
Even our chairs are licorice red,  
weeping  
cotton-candy wisps of stuffing.

All the other patrons  
sketch, write poetry,  
tap out rhythms  
on the edges of tables  
as they sip their coffee.  
Prague is old,  
but her streets are dancing.

Aunt Žofie says:  
*This city's become popular  
with Westerners  
who weren't allowed here  
before the old government  
changed hands  
with the new.  
They think they can become  
the next Picasso  
if they let Prague into their hearts.*

Even if the artists fail,  
I still envy them;  
I haven't created  
*anything*

in what feels like forever.

I am just a tangled mess of notes  
that don't make up a song  
and barely  
make up a girl.

**No one looks up**

when Aunt Žofie orders us coffee,  
her voice thunderclap loud.  
They're too lost  
in the worlds they're making  
to pay attention  
to what's happening  
in this one.

*My brother told me  
you want to be a musician, says Aunt Žofie.  
He also told me  
it wasn't practical—  
as if being practical  
ever matters  
when it comes to art.*

I shrug.  
*He's right.  
I can't make money  
playing the violin.  
It won't give me  
stability in life.*

*You've seen Rose Cottage—  
it's a simple place, Aunt Žofie replies.  
But I earn enough*

*with my paintings  
to keep coffee in my cup  
and a roof  
over my head.  
And when I need to see the sky  
open like a book,  
I take the train out of the city.  
What more do I need?*

Aunt Žofie soon leaves her coffee  
    (and me)  
behind  
to greet another artist,  
his fingers smudged with paint.

I'm relieved.  
Now I don't have to disappoint her  
with the truth:  
I can't defy my parents,  
I can't be like her.

I do what I'm told.

**Outside,**  
a little girl is staring into the café,  
pressing her pale hands  
against the window.

Her dress  
is the color of strawberries,  
her dark eyes are filled with wishes  
for sour cherry jam  
and squares of milk chocolate—  
everything

just out of her reach.

I wave, but the girl  
only scowls at me.

The rose

(the petals  
the pale yellow of old  
forgotten lace)

tucked behind her ear

flutters

each time she moves.

It looks

as if it's sprouted  
from her very skin.

I close my eyes

against the sight of her  
and the impossibility of her flower.

Today

has been strange enough  
already.

When Aunt Žofie returns,  
the strawberry girl is gone,  
taking the wonders

(caught like pebbles)  
in the soles of her shoes  
with her.



## Chapter Seven

**My aunt and I go from shop to shop,**  
the sun striking my back  
like a fist.  
We follow her list of items,  
a trail of bread crumbs  
that will  
    (eventually)  
take us home.

Aunt Žofie purchases:  
tubes of paint,  
new brushes,  
reels of canvas so large  
they could cover Prague's streets.  
I buy:  
leather gloves,  
thick socks,  
a sun hat—  
protection  
against the forest  
trying to overtake the cemetery.

Every shop we visit is hidden away,  
the rooms so cold  
December itself  
would feel at home in them.  
I wasn't built for places like this;  
July blazes in my blood.  
I ask to wait outside  
before I freeze.

I dance to keep warm,  
so that my skin remembers  
summer hasn't ended yet.  
I still have time to change  
my future—  
whatever it may be.

**I don't wander the streets**

in my aunt's absence,  
but my gaze does,  
traveling  
up, up, up  
over the rooftops  
before coming to rest  
on the house across the way.

The building looks like a rotten tooth,  
black and chipped.  
A hundred years of dust  
have turned the windows silver.  
Anything  
could be hidden  
beneath that glaze.

A man in a butter-yellow suit  
perches like a falcon  
on the front steps.  
His tie bounces  
in time with the music  
he summons  
from the black violin  
propped beneath his chin.  
The instrument's silver strings

steal the sunlight.

The man smiles  
as he plays.  
His front teeth are crooked,  
fence posts bent in the wind.  
The notes of his song  
slide  
through the gap  
between them.

He looks happier  
than anyone  
I've seen in Prague so far.

**The music**  
drags me  
across the cobblestones,  
demanding  
I go forward.

In Miami,  
there are riptides  
that will pull you under the water,  
leaving you  
beneath the waves  
with no mermaids to raise you up  
from the depths.

This feels  
like a riptide,  
drawing me out  
from the shore.

But where  
is it  
taking  
me?

**Up close,**  
the man with the violin  
is younger than Aunt Žofie  
or any of the adults in my life.  
But he is still more grown-up  
than I am.

His black hair is faded,  
like someone's memory  
of a night sky.  
But there are no stars  
in this man's eyes.  
One is hazel;  
the other is white  
as a cup of milk.

The stranger asks:  
*Mohu vám pomoci?*  
*Can I help you?*  
His German accent  
wraps around  
each Czech  
and English word  
like a wool scarf.

*“Un bel dì, vedremo”* from *Madame Butterfly*, I say.  
*That's what you were playing,*  
*wasn't it?*

The man's face lights up,  
bright as the summer sun.  
*You're a musician then!*  
*Wonderful!*  
*My name is Rudolf Wassermann.*  
*And you are...?*

I fumble for a name  
that isn't mine  
    (never give your real name  
    to a stranger;  
    they could be  
    the wrong sort of angel  
    and gobble it up)  
but I can never be anyone else  
except me.  
*I'm Ilana.*

Wassermann laughs,  
bouncing  
up  
on his toes.  
*It's wonderful to meet you, Ilana!*  
*Do you play the violin?*  
*You must!*

I step away from Wassermann.  
But the cobblestones  
catch at my heels,  
trying to shove me back to him.  
*I used to.*  
*But not anymore.*  
*I left my violin somewhere else.*

Wassermann taps his chin  
in time  
with the music  
that must be buzzing  
in his veins.  
*Well then,  
someone will just have to find you  
a new violin.  
A person should never be  
without their music  
for too long.*

He spreads his hands,  
white as the pages of a book  
I haven't read yet.  
I follow the gesture down  
and see the truth,  
an absence  
written on the cobblestones  
too firmly for me to deny.

Wassermann  
has no shadow.

I look up,  
but he is already gone,  
just like the boy  
on Rose Hill.



## Chapter Eight

### **I rise with the sun**

the following morning, unable  
to sleep any longer.

My mind knows

I'm in Prague,

but my body insists

I haven't left Miami.

I've traveled,

not only across space

but through time.

I pull out my workbooks,

but soon, I stray

from the diagrams,

the strings of vocabulary words

better left

in the mouths of poets.

Aunt Žofie told me

she must paint by moonlight;

I must use the sunlight

to peel away the mysteries

from Rose Hill's cemetery.

(I can study

anytime.

Can't I?)

### **I dig**

through the garden shed,

retrieve

hedge trimmers,  
gloves,  
my sense of determination.

Flower petals  
cling to my tools;  
I shake them off as I climb the hill.  
Tomorrow,  
the edges of the petals  
will crumble  
and brown,  
like strawberry girl's roses.

But today,  
they are ballerinas  
in summertime skirts  
who dance only for me.

The dead boy  
isn't in the graveyard now.  
But maybe  
if I'm quiet,  
he'll show himself again.

**What to wear**  
in a haunted cemetery:

A pair of jeans  
as soft and pale as sand,  
my new sun hat,  
its brim half as wide as the river,  
burns from nettles  
that wrap around my ankles  
like bracelets,

blisters that sting  
whenever I flex my hands,  
secrets  
up against my skin.

**Things I'm forbidden to do**  
in a Jewish cemetery:

Disturb the bones.  
The dead are resting, waiting  
to be called back to life.

(Or so the Torah tells us.)

Bring any of the following—  
a kohen,  
a Torah scroll,  
food,  
cigarettes,  
mourners after nightfall.  
This is what I should do:  
honor the dead, always.

**I don't know where to put**  
the saplings  
and branches  
I cut away.  
I drag them halfway down Rose Hill.  
An hour later,  
it looks like I've moved  
an entire forest.

Calluses build up like empires  
across my palms.

But I feel the way I used to  
when I strung the right notes together  
on my violin,  
as if what I'm doing *matters*.

I never knew  
the people buried here  
in life.  
But if I don't take care of this place,  
who *will*?



## Chapter Nine

### **The ghost boy**

weaves between the trees,  
appearing in patches of sunlight  
like a stray cat.

I keep my head down,  
trying  
not to meet  
his ocean-blessed eyes.

I can see the woods through him,  
gray and shimmering,  
as if the trees are ghosts too.  
His hair runs like ink,  
like all the things  
he hasn't said to me.  
(But might.)

*You can see me.*  
The boy's voice  
is a spring breeze,  
lost  
in the sticky heat of summer.  
I'm surprised  
he speaks English,  
but maybe I shouldn't be.  
Who's to say  
the living  
and the dead  
can't learn from each other?

*I can see you.*

I sit back on my haunches,  
careful  
not to make  
the dry leaves rustle.  
Too much noise  
is bound to scare him away.

**The boy is the only person my age**

I've talked to  
since I left Miami.  
I didn't realize  
how much I missed it  
until now.

*I'm Ilana.*

*What's your name?*

*I'm.*

*I'm Benjamin.*

The boy's fingers twitch  
at his sides,  
like he wants to take my hand,  
but has fallen  
out of practice.  
It must be hard  
to recall how to be alive  
when you've been mist and memory  
for years.

A rose

blooms from his collar.

I want to think  
the color of Benjamin's petals

(lavender,  
like first light)  
is hopeful.  
They are more vivid  
than the flower worn  
(or grown)  
by the little girl  
at the café.

*I don't mean to be rude,  
but why are you here?  
Benjamin asks.  
Why do you care  
about this cemetery?*

I pluck my gloves off,  
finger by finger.  
The dirt caked in the leather  
crackles  
and pops  
as I do.  
*Because no one else does.  
Someone loved  
everyone  
buried here—  
they deserve to be  
taken care of.  
They shouldn't be forgotten.*

Too many people who vanish  
(like the ones buried  
in the sugarcane fields  
of my mother's dark dreams)

disappear from our memories too.

**I want to ask**

if part of Benjamin  
is sleeping somewhere  
under my feet,  
but I plaster my tongue  
to the roof of my mouth.  
Asking him  
where his death is hidden  
when we've only just met  
would be cruel.

If I were a ghost,  
I wouldn't like to be reminded of it,  
especially  
by someone whose heart  
still flashes with life  
under her shirt.

(I wouldn't like  
to be reminded  
about my death  
at all.)

**Benjamin**

sits down next to me,  
gripping his ankles tightly,  
as if my breath  
might send his soul  
sailing far from Prague.  
He's close enough now  
that if he were ordinary,  
I could trace

the sharp curve  
of his jaw,  
and smell the sweat  
and earth  
on his skin.

But Benjamin  
is negative space  
where a boy should be,  
and he hunches his shoulders  
up to his ears.  
Why is he trying  
to make himself smaller  
when he's barely  
a whisper  
in this world as it is?

*No one ever comes here, he says.  
Not until you.  
I thought they all wanted to forget.  
I thought they'd succeeded.*

*They?*  
I edge  
just a little closer.

*The neighbors.  
The people of Prague.  
The living.  
Why do you want  
to remember the dead  
when they aren't even yours?*

Laughter grows inside me

the way the rose grows  
from Benjamin.

*I'm Jewish—  
we're good at remembering.  
We're asked to  
in every prayer,  
every candle we light,  
every line of Torah.*

The dead boy says:  
*Zochreinu l'chayim,*  
like we've both  
been singing the lyrics  
to the very same song.

**I run my fingers**  
along the chipped base  
of the *matzevah* closest to me.  
*Does anyone remember you, Benjamin?  
Does your family still live near Rose Hill?*  
It's as close to his death  
as I can make myself go.

Benjamin shakes his head.  
*I barely remember them,  
but I know they're gone.  
I'm the last one  
left in Prague.  
But it's for the best.  
My family never had to see  
the worst of what happened  
to our cemetery,  
to our city.*

*You could go too, I say.*

*You could follow them.*

*Maybe*

*I could help you*

*find them.*

*Maybe—*

*No!*

Benjamin jumps up,  
his rose turning black  
with sudden rot.

*You shouldn't even be here—*

*it was a mistake*

*for me to come back!*

*Why?*

*It's only a cemetery.*

*It's peaceful here.*

*Isn't it?*

Benjamin's eyes  
move like a rabbit's,  
the pupils swollen  
with fear.

*I have to go.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Wait!*

I reach for him,  
even though I won't be able  
to touch him.

But Benjamin is gone

and I am left

alone

again,  
heartstrings humming  
with his absence.

**I want to clean Benjamin's grave,**  
lay a stone there for him.

(Flowers  
would wither  
and fade.  
A stone is eternal—  
like memory,  
like love.)

But how can I honor  
a disappearing boy  
when I don't even know  
where he's buried?



Interlude I:  
***Wassermann***

**I was born a *vodník*,**  
the prince of rivers,  
the keeper of drowned souls.

My first river  
was the Danube.  
She danced  
through the Kingdom of Bavaria  
and the nation of Hungary,  
so beautiful  
that men composed waltzes  
inspired by  
her jeweled waters.

Each day,

I fished the souls of the dead  
from her current  
and drank them with my tea.

Most humans  
avoided me.

But there was one  
who sought me out—  
a rabbi, in the city of Ulm.

He begged me  
to release the souls  
I had captured.

And I  
(so young, so foolish)  
laughed at him!

The dead  
I took from the water  
tasted sweeter than pomegranates.  
Why would I ever  
part with them?

But I should have known  
only a magician  
would dare to approach me.

When I refused him,  
the rabbi cast me  
out of Ulm  
and Bavaria.  
He bound me  
to a distant river—  
the Vltava  
in Prague.

The rabbi's magic  
held me fast.  
I could not leave  
the city of a hundred spires.

**After my exile,**  
I tried to craft myself  
into something almost mortal.  
I vowed  
to be on my best behavior.  
Only then,  
I thought,  
could I avoid  
being sent into exile again.

I feigned humanity,  
went to university,  
attempted to turn  
my appetites  
to poetry,  
polynomial equations,  
and dentistry,  
to fill the gaping hole  
in my belly.  
But I couldn't  
deny myself forever.

It started  
so small.  
I stole pinches,  
mouthfuls of people  
who drowned in the river—  
a memory here,

the name  
of a once-beloved pet there,  
just so there was  
a little color  
in my cheeks,  
just enough  
to drive away  
the emptiness  
inside me.

Yet my hunger  
ate at me  
until I could hold back  
no longer.

I found the dead  
(as I always do)  
and coaxed them,  
one by one,  
into a house  
of my own making.  
Who were the dead?

Why,  
the Jewish children  
of Prague.  
I couldn't very well  
let the rabbi  
go unpunished,  
now could I?

**This is the lesson**  
all monsters  
must learn:  
one's appetite

wins out  
every time.  
You can live  
without love,  
without a home,  
without a river  
if you are full  
of something else.



Second Movement:  
***The Boy on the Hill***

## Chapter Ten

### **I dream about men**

wandering the streets of Prague,  
their lantern-eyes alight.  
The wind doesn't stir  
their coats;  
their throats barely flash  
as they breathe.

I can't see  
the faces of these men.  
I don't have to.  
I can recognize  
my family's monsters  
    (of the past  
        the present  
            the future)  
even when I'm asleep.

### **Sarah and Martina**

don't respond to my messages  
for days.  
Anxiety whittles me down  
until I am small enough  
to fit inside a teacup  
and I've convinced myself  
they've forgotten  
I even exist.

Maybe  
I don't.  
Maybe Prague

is in another dimension  
where the walls are made of ivy  
and there's no difference  
between the living  
and the dead.

**On Shabbat,**

Sarah (finally)  
sends me photos of her and Martina  
posing on the beach,  
their mouths puckered at the camera,  
seeking a kiss.

Sarah tells me:

*We wish you were here!*  
*We're having so much fun!*  
*Summer's not the same*  
*without you!*

I shove my phone  
back into my pocket;  
I wish I could throw it  
into the river instead.  
Jealousy  
tastes bitter,  
a mouthful of wormwood  
or dead flowers.

There isn't anything  
I can send Sarah  
that wouldn't make me  
look pathetic.  
I have no pictures of myself  
at a club, or with a beer,

standing beside  
a group of friends  
who will carry  
the memory of me  
and the scorching June  
we spent together  
for years to come.  
I'm alone;  
only secrets  
keep me company.

**Aunt Žofie's art**  
lives in a gallery  
unlike any other  
I've been to.

The building is narrow;  
a spiral staircase  
winds up the center,  
like the spine of a giant.  
Papier-mâché flowers  
bloom from the walls  
and there are paintings  
tucked away  
in every corner.  
Some of the art  
even spills out  
onto the warped floorboards,  
a wave  
no one  
    (not even my aunt)  
can contain.

I walk through the gallery  
while Aunt Žofie laughs  
and bargains  
with the khaki-clad tourists  
the wind has blown  
through her door.

They're always Americans  
trying to own a bit of Prague.  
They must believe  
they can cram the city  
into their suitcases  
and bring it home with them.

But no one  
can own magic.

**In the worlds Žofie paints,**  
queens with black owl eyes  
dance on bone-thin branches.  
Satyrs with goat legs  
steer leaf boats  
across the many waters of Prague.  
Witches float  
in crystal spaceships  
winking in  
and out of the dark.

Longing swells in me  
like a bubble.  
I wish I could fill my days  
(and years)  
with what I've created too.

**The more paintings I see,**  
the more I start to realize  
the same figure  
appears in every one.

The man is barely there,  
a nightmare left unfinished,  
chased away by the dawn  
and dreams of springtime.  
But he stands out on each canvas,  
a living scar.  
He has no face,  
only crooked teeth  
and fox-bright eyes,  
bottomless  
with hunger.

Maybe he's a metaphor—  
for poverty,  
or all the monsters  
    shaped like men  
my aunt has seen.  
But he feels too *real*.  
There's a texture to this creature  
that can't be found  
in any dream.

Maybe Benjamin  
isn't the only piece  
of true magic  
hovering on the edge  
of Aunt Žofie's life.

**What tears me away from the paintings**

is the sound of a violin  
playing high above me.  
I creep  
toward the stairs,  
ears attuned  
to the bombastic scales of Beethoven.

I'm not the only one listening.  
From the corner of my eye,  
I see a flash of a girl  
in a dress  
the color of strawberries—  
the same girl from the café.

She gives me  
a wild look  
and runs up the stairs,  
faster  
than any child  
has the right to be.

**I follow the strawberry girl**  
and the trail of  
    (dying)  
flower petals  
raining from her skin,  
from her *soul*.  
My braid slaps my neck,  
urging me on.  
I have to catch her;  
I have to talk to her.

I reach the final step  
on the second floor,

but I'm too late.  
The music stops  
and the strawberry girl  
melts away,  
a drop of water  
pulled into  
a much greater sea.

But someone else  
is waiting for me.

(Will I ever really be alone  
in my father's city?)



## Chapter Eleven

*Ilana!*

*We meet again!*

Rudolf Wassermann  
sets his black violin down  
and claps his hands together  
like he's just been given  
a birthday present.

The paintings around him  
look strangely dim,  
their colors muted  
by the glaring yellow of Wassermann's suit.  
His shoes are wet;  
they drip rudely onto the floor  
where the man's shadow  
should be,  
turning the space tar black.

I know better than to ask  
if he paid  
to come inside the gallery.  
I don't think he's paid  
for anything  
in years.

A creature can get away  
with almost anything  
if they only move  
along the ragged edges of the world.

**I ask Wassermann:**

*Where did the little girl go?*

Wassermann's gaze  
sweeps over me like a paintbrush.  
*Oh, you mean Pearl?*  
*She's gone home.*

*Where's home?*  
It's a simple question,  
but one most of my family  
wouldn't be able to answer  
honestly.  
There are too *many* answers—  
    Prague,  
    Cuba,  
    Miami,  
nowhere  
and everywhere.

*Why, the house*  
*where I met you!*  
*It's one of Old Town's finest.*  
Wassermann whistles again  
    (Waltz in A-Flat Major  
    by Brahms)  
as he walks his fingers  
across the black violin's bridge.  
The veins that show  
through the skin of his wrists  
are silver—  
proof that Wassermann isn't like me  
or anyone else.

I don't know why,  
but I'm a little jealous of the man

with no shadow.  
He always seems  
stuffed  
full  
of beautiful things.

***When did you start  
playing the violin?*** I ask.  
*You're very good.*

*Oh,  
when I was much,  
much younger.  
I'm older than I look, you see.  
Though I hardly fit  
into the world of grown-ups.  
Wassermann grins,  
showing off  
his ridiculous teeth.*

(I like that they're flawed.  
Everyone should have  
at least one imperfection.)

*What do you hope to be  
when you grow up, Ilana?  
An artist?  
Or something else?*

His question  
feels loaded,  
like a gun.  
Whenever my parents  
ask me

the same thing,  
they're always disappointed  
by my answer.

But Wassermann  
has no interest  
in degrees and salaries;  
he doesn't fear  
an empty bank account.  
He'd have to be human  
to care about those things  
and he's anything *but*.

***I want to be a violinist, I say.***

*I want to compose.*

*I want to be surrounded by music  
every hour, every day.*

*But that's as impossible  
as my old wish.*

*When I was little,*

*I wanted to be a mermaid.*

Wassermann winks,  
his smile  
stretching even wider.

*Perhaps*

*it's not as impossible  
as you may believe.*

*There's already something  
about the ocean in you,  
and Prague has a river  
that would love for you  
to call it home.*

*I'd be a better mermaid  
than I am a girl, I laugh.  
But my parents  
wouldn't allow that  
any more than they'd let me  
make music for a living.*

**Wassermann bows his head.**

*It's such a pity  
some people don't appreciate  
your love of music.  
But there are those—  
myself among them—  
who understand  
that music is life.  
Without songs,  
we'd surely choke  
on the ugly, brittle pieces  
of the world.  
Don't you agree?*

He didn't need to ask.  
I'd already started nodding  
when he'd barely begun.

***Would you like to play?***

Wassermann holds  
the black violin out—  
a gift,  
a curse  
I can't refuse,  
even if I know  
I should.

I take the instrument from him.  
It fits perfectly  
under my chin,  
as if it were meant to be there—  
meant to be *mine*.

The murmur of the bow  
against the strings  
reminds me:  
I don't have to be a girl  
uprooted from my country,  
tied down by the knots  
of other people's expectations.

I can be  
so much bigger than that,  
and I am  
as I start to play.

**I'm in the major key.**  
I'm E sharps, D minors.  
I'm a crescendo  
building toward something furious.  
I picture my bones unraveling  
like ribbons,  
my hair  
dissolving in the sunlight,  
my soul  
rising  
up  
out of my skin.

**Reaching**  
the final note of my song

feels like falling  
from the stars.  
But I don't have time to mourn  
my return to earth.

The man with no shadow  
clutches one hand  
over his heart.

The other  
goes to his milky eye,  
wiping away a tear.  
*If you're ever looking  
for a teacher,  
I'd be happy to be yours.  
And you already play  
so beautifully, Ilana.*

I eat up Wassermann's praise  
    (in spite of myself)  
the way he devoured  
my music.  
*Thank you.*

The memory of the future  
my parents decided for me  
still hangs around my neck  
like a stone.

But why shouldn't I accept  
Wassermann's offer?  
I have the whole summer.  
I can study,  
work in the cemetery,  
and still

play music.

**I recognize the tinny sound**

made by Aunt Žofie's  
pink high heels  
clicking  
on the iron staircase.

She calls out:

*Ilana?*

*Are you up there?*

*I thought*

*I heard music.*

But when she reaches the landing,  
the wet impressions  
of Wassermann's shoes  
are all that's left of him.

Aunt Žofie looks at the little puddle  
beneath her painting  
of Libuše the prophetess.

*Did you spill something?*

I shake my head,  
my truth  
hidden under my tongue  
like a candy.

*No. I don't know*

*where the water came from.*



## Chapter Twelve

### **At first light,**

I return to the cemetery,  
shaking off new  
    (and unsettling)  
dreams of a man  
stealing  
strawberries from a garden  
that won't ever be his.  
My dreams  
don't make sense  
anymore.  
But neither  
does the waking world.

### **Benjamin isn't in the graveyard.**

Disappointment  
weighs me down  
until I feel as heavy  
as the gray waves of *matzevot*.

I want to run back to Rose Cottage.

    My books are waiting for me;  
I'll never earn  
the test score I need  
unless I start studying.  
But the headstones  
look so lonely;  
I can't leave them like this.

### **My work goes slowly.**

I can't tear the weeds free

without disturbing the  
    (hallowed)  
ground.  
I trim the plants  
as close to the earth as I can,  
cursing  
their prickled spines  
and stubbornness.

But I don't stop.

We Jews call our cemeteries  
*beit chayyim*—  
    the house of the living,  
*beit shalom*—  
    the house of peace.

This place  
was,  
is,  
always will be  
    sacred,  
even if  
the only visitors  
are the bluebird choirs  
in the birch trees  
and one living girl.

**Benjamin's arrival**  
is fox-quiet.  
He sits down beside me,  
crossing one leg  
over the other.  
The light pours through him,

as if he's made of lace.

*I'm sorry  
about the other day, Benjamin says.  
Running away was childish.  
I wasn't sure  
if I could trust you.  
But you're taking care  
of the cemetery.  
That says so much  
about your heart—  
and your intentions.*

*I would never do anything  
to hurt this place  
or the memory  
of the people here, I reply.  
I just want to help.*

But I think  
Benjamin feared more  
than what my intentions might be.

There's a secret  
hanging around him  
like a cloud of smoke.  
It clings to  
every strand of Benjamin's hair  
and the folds of his clothes.

What reason could a dead boy have  
to be so scared?  
Does he think  
he'll be forced to move on

if I tend to the cemetery  
like a garden?

Or is something else  
troubling him,  
    some greater shadow  
I haven't learned  
how to see?

### **Benjamin unfolds**

a loose collection of pages  
from his pockets  
and spreads them across his lap.  
Each calls to me  
as songs have in the past.  
I'm  
    (only half)  
surprised to see  
he's an artist.  
His paintings are made of unearthly colors.  
I want to press each  
into my heart.

I ask Benjamin:  
*How can you paint like this?*  
*Can you imagine*  
*things into existence?*

Benjamin guides his hand  
down one of the pages.  
*There's a place I go*  
*where I can eat and drink*  
*and hold a paintbrush*  
*in my hands.*

*There's a place I go  
where I can almost  
be alive.*

*Olam Ha-Ba? I ask.  
The World to Come?*

The blue-eyed boy goes still.  
*I've never been there.  
It's still to come  
for me.*

Then Benjamin  
purses his lips and silence  
submerges us  
once again.

**The ghost**

riffles through his art,  
skipping past certain pages.  
But I blush  
when I catch a glimpse of a drawing  
he tries to hide.

Because  
it's

of *me*.

I'm not beautiful enough  
to be anyone's inspiration,  
but when formed  
by Benjamin's hand,  
I look mythical.

No one has ever seen me

like *that*—  
let alone a boy.  
I'm no afterthought with him;  
I'm fully present in his (after) life  
and he is present  
in mine.

**He has a favorite subject,**  
this lost boy of wonders:  
Prague.

Angels fill  
the sharp blue skies of Benjamin's city.  
Rabbi Loew's golem  
stalks the streets,  
his eyes burning with furious  
    and just  
intentions.

An author sits  
hunched over a typewriter  
with Hebrew letters  
printed on its keys.  
Cockroaches scuttle  
across his feet.  
The insects  
have the same sad look  
as the writer himself.

The Vltava isn't friendly  
in Benjamin's Prague.  
The river  
cleaves his city  
in two,

a black knife.  
Wicked mermaids,  
*rusalki* from Aunt Žofie's gruesome,  
ancient tales  
gather on the shorelines,  
murderous as crows.  
They smile, exposing  
double rows of white shark teeth.

They don't hide anything from me.  
We're all girls;  
we know our softness conceals  
what's most merciless about us.

### **Benjamin's art**

reminds me of the pale figure  
haunting  
Aunt Žofie's paintings.  
His brushstroke beasts are lively  
    (like hers)  
and every street  
hides  
a nest of monsters.

I don't know if I want to live  
in Benjamin's Prague.  
But I don't think  
I have much of a choice.  
*Is all of this real?* I ask.

*I wish the angels were  
and the rusalki weren't, Benjamin says.  
And my zayde  
swore up and down*

*he'd seen the remains of the golem  
in Staronová synagoga's attic.*

*He said  
we should have buried it  
in the cemetery,  
along with old Torah scrolls,  
because Rabbi Loew  
wrote the name of God  
on its forehead.*

Benjamin pauses,  
a small smile  
    (lost somewhere  
        between my life  
            and his death)

taking shape  
on his lips.  
*I'd forgotten  
about all the strange things  
Zayde used to tell me.  
Like how birds  
sang about the future,  
if you just listened hard enough.  
I don't know if he was right.  
But I used to feed them anyway.*

I say:  
*I feed stray cats  
by the shoreline where I live.  
Maybe they're like your grandfather's birds  
and can read the future  
in the cowrie shells  
that wash up on the beach.  
But even if they can,*

*they'll never reveal  
what they see.  
Cats enjoy mysteries  
a little too much  
to give away anybody's ending.*

***What else do you do at home?***

Benjamin asks.  
He speaks more freely now,  
his fear  
    (of what—  
    or of who?)  
melting away  
in the sun.

I shrug.  
*I play music.  
I swim in the sea.  
I spend time  
with my friends.  
I fight  
with my parents.  
I dream  
about monsters.  
What else do you do  
when you're sixteen?*

*I did the same things  
when I was alive, says Benjamin.  
I do almost the same things  
now that I'm sixteen forever.  
It's good to know  
not everything in the world*

*has changed.*



## Chapter Thirteen

**It's the strangeness of Benjamin and me**

that makes me speak my truth.

If we can talk about magic,

we should be able

to talk about *anything*.

*My parents*

*don't want me to become a violinist.*

*That's what we fight about—*

*what we always fight about.*

*They want me to grow up*

*to be practical,*

*and musicians*

*are anything but.*

*We do everything*

*with our hearts*

*and nothing*

*with our heads.*

*They want me*

*to make money*

*the way only*

*engineers,*

*doctors,*

*and lawyers*

*can.*

*They're afraid*

*I'll wind up*

*where they started*

*when they first arrived*

*in America—*

*with nothing.  
And now they've made me afraid  
of the future too.*

**A new rosebud**

*breaks open  
on the back of Benjamin's hand,  
a thoughtful  
frosty white.  
He's made of too much earth,  
not enough boy.*

*I know how that feels, he whispers.  
I wanted to sketch, paint, sculpt.  
I wanted to be like Alphonse Mucha  
and make the world brighter,  
more extraordinary.  
I wanted to bring gardens  
to those  
who couldn't grow flowers themselves.*

*But my father  
wanted me to become a doctor,  
to heal the world  
with skills that meant  
I'd never go hungry.  
So I studied from dawn  
until the last star  
left the sky,  
trying not to think  
about going to medical school  
in Vienna  
as I sketched my dreams*

*in the margins of my textbooks.*

I dare  
to lean closer to him.  
*Then what happened?*

Benjamin's rose  
darkens.  
*I died*  
*before my father and I*  
*could settle the argument.*

**Everyone's story is supposed to end**  
with a death.

There's something so sad  
about how Benjamin's *didn't*.  
He exists at the second to last page,  
the eleventh hour,  
the twilight  
of his self.

He never gets to close the book,  
he just *is*—  
stranded,  
    timeless,  
unable to be  
one thing  
or the other.

It's this thought  
that seizes me in its jaws  
when Benjamin passes his hand  
over mine.  
The feel of him is so cold

it burns.

I let it.

**I spend the rest of the morning**

talking with Benjamin

as I untangle the ivy

from a group of *matzevot*,

(the names

on the stones

faded

beneath wind, rain, time)

until the heat of the noon sun

urges me

inside Rose Cottage.

I invite Benjamin along.

He declines,

but I know

he'll be back.

**What kind of song**

would I use

to capture Benjamin's likeness?

Would he be a waltz,

moving slowly

over the face of the world?

Or a sonata,

lonely and caught

in a spell

of his own making?

I can't decide.

But magic

isn't meant to be captured

by anyone.

It would be like locking a sunbeam  
inside a glass jar.

Maybe magic  
is just meant to *be*.



## Chapter Fourteen

**As I scrub the cemetery dirt**  
off my hands,  
I hear a knock at the door.  
It carries through the house  
like a shout.

I don't have time  
to take off my red sneakers;  
they leave dusty prints  
on the old wood floorboards  
as I run to the front of the cottage.

By the time I open the door,  
whoever was there  
is gone.  
But they left something behind:  
a box  
wrapped in plain brown paper  
tied with a cord.

I carry it inside, searching  
for a note or card  
tucked  
under the string.  
It could have come  
from anyone;  
it could be  
*for* anyone.

(But deep  
down

I know  
it's for *me*.)

I tear the paper off the box,  
hands  
shaking,  
and lift the lid.

**Inside, Wassermann's black violin rests**  
like a sleeping cat,  
begging to be touched.

I see my reflection  
in the instrument's resinous wood,  
the skin of a black pine  
felled decades ago.  
In its darkness,  
I could almost be pretty,  
the girl Benjamin drew  
with such care.  
Gently,  
I raise the violin  
up to the light.  
I shouldn't play it;  
it doesn't belong to me.  
But I haven't  
had an instrument of my own  
since I came to Prague.

Someone  
who loves songs  
made this.

Someone  
like

*me.*

**My fingers find**

all the right strings  
and I pick up my feet  
to dance.

My parents  
didn't steal my music.  
It was hidden away,  
waiting  
in the bridge of the black violin  
for me  
to call it home.

**This is how Aunt Žofie finds me,**

twirling around the kitchen,  
my red shoes blurring beneath me.  
I move so fast  
I don't think I can stop  
until she grabs my arm.

The bow  
slips  
off the strings,  
leaving us in silence so ugly  
I want to scream.

Aunt Žofie plucks the violin  
out of my hands.

*What are you doing?*

*Where did you get this?*

She sounds as frantic  
as my dancing.

*Someone*  
*left it at the door.*  
There's a sharp edge to every syllable;  
I'm more wolf  
than girl.

Aunt Žofie's frown  
is grave deep.  
*It must have been delivered*  
*to the wrong address.*  
*I hope the real owner*  
*finds out that we have it soon.*  
*I'll put it in my studio*  
*until they come for it.*

She's wrong—  
this isn't a mistake.  
Wassermann said  
he wanted to hear my music  
and be my teacher.  
Now he can do both.



## Chapter Fifteen

**Everyone else my age**  
sneaks cigarettes,  
gulps of wine,  
kisses with the wrong person.  
My rebellion is different:  
I've started sneaking songs.

Whenever Aunt Žofie  
goes to the shop,  
the gallery,  
the bank,  
I pull the black violin  
out from under her easel,  
and lose myself  
in music.

I play Beethoven,  
Schubert,  
Mozart,  
Philip Glass,  
Jorge Grundman.

I play until my hands throb  
more than they do  
when I've done battle  
with the cemetery's forest.

I'm getting away with something—  
giving in  
to an addiction.

And I don't ever want to stop.

**I'm becoming a more skilled violinist**

by the hour.

My notes are cleaner, sharper;  
they move faster  
than light.

But better than the music I play  
is the music I *compose*.

Berceuses, nocturnes,  
sonatas blossom  
from my fingers,  
the way roses do  
from Benjamin's veins.

I record  
one of my new compositions  
for Sarah and Martina.  
The quality of the audio is poor;  
but I can still read the envy  
between each word of Martina's response:

*You've gotten even better—  
what happened?*

I tell her:

*It's quiet here;  
I can hear the music  
even when I'm not playing.*

My friends  
don't know what to make of that.  
They fall silent,  
somewhere in Miami.

(Again.)

**Joy is honey-sweet in my mouth**

when I tell Benjamin  
about the music.

*I haven't wanted to compose  
in months!*

*All I could ever think about  
was how my parents wouldn't approve.*

*But now  
everything's different.*

*I'm so happy  
the man with no shadow  
gave me his violin.*

Benjamin tries to smile,  
but his grin  
shimmers  
at the corners.

Why isn't he happier for me?  
I put my hand over his  
and don't shiver when his fingers  
cold  
as November rain  
pass through mine.

(I wish  
they wouldn't.

I wish  
I could hold his hand  
and feel it properly.)

*Don't worry.*

*As long as I'm in Prague,  
I'll always come here  
to take care of the cemetery*

*and be with you, I say.*

*I know.*

But Benjamin's words  
sound like a nocturne,  
tinged  
with too many shades of regret.



## Chapter Sixteen

### The ivy

I've freed the *matzevot* from  
lies in a heap.  
It looks like the sort of thread  
Aunt Žofie's fairies  
use to make their dresses.

But I have no need  
for magical fabric today.  
I've taken my exam books  
up to Rose Hill;  
I can think more clearly here  
than anywhere else in the world.  
Maybe some of that magic  
will extend to my studies.

I wipe my grimy hand  
on a page instructing me  
how to decode  
SAT word problems.  
I read aloud:  
*According to this chart,*  
*if 500 people,*  
*18 or older,*  
*visited a museum in 2017,*  
*approximately how many people*  
*in total*  
*visited the museum in 2017?*

Benjamin doesn't announce himself.  
But when does he ever?

He greets me instead  
with a question.  
*Which museum is it?*

I glance up,  
unsurprised that he's come.  
*Does that matter?*  
*It does.*

Benjamin steps  
around the ivy.  
(Does it move a little  
when his ankle brushes against it?  
Or am I only dreaming?)

*Everyone visits  
the Mucha Museum  
and the Kafka Museum.  
But not many people  
know about  
the Museum of Alchemists.*

When I ask him  
what an alchemist is,  
Benjamin beams.  
*A magician  
who turns lead  
into gold,  
who finds potions to make kings  
immortal.  
Didn't you ever have alchemists  
in America?*

I learn more  
from Benjamin's stories

than I ever have studying.  
And they're so much more interesting  
than the book I close  
and put aside.

**I spill my secrets like water**

when I'm with my ghost.  
Benjamin has made me bold,  
along with the cemetery  
    (less green,  
    more itself  
    with every passing day  
    and every weed  
    I trim)  
and the return of my music.

But I still have to gather  
all my courage  
to ask him:  
*Which headstone is yours?*

The boy dusts off his trousers.  
Today I can see  
a little less of the sky  
through him.  
He doesn't feel  
like an echo  
of what was  
and never can be again.  
I follow Benjamin to a *matzevah*  
sheltered by an old elm.  
A crack  
races

across the willow tree  
carved on it.  
One of its branches is broken in half,  
the sign of a life  
cut short.

*This one*, says Benjamin.  
He runs his fingers  
across the *matzevah*.  
They part the curtain of ivy  
and he pulls back abruptly,  
shock  
stealing the color  
from his already pale face.

We look at each other,  
but can't find the words  
to describe what we have just seen:  
a dead boy  
reaching  
into the land of the living.  
Instead, I read the inscription  
    *(Benjamin ben Aaron,  
    may his soul  
    be bound up  
    in the bond of eternal life)*  
on the headstone and wish  
I could whisper  
Benjamin back into this world  
for more than just a moment.  
*I'll take care of your grave.  
I promise.*

**I snap photos of the cemetery.**

I even attempt to capture Benjamin  
in one of the pictures.

But he appears  
as nothing more  
than a glimmer  
at the edge of the frame.

I try to explain to Sarah and Martina  
what the cemetery  
means to me

(what *Benjamin* means to me)

but the words  
stick to the back of my throat  
and the ends of my fingertips.

I can hear Sarah's gasp  
when she types:

*These pictures are so creepy!*

*Where are you?*

I can hear Martina's disbelieving laugh  
when she asks me:

*Seen any ghosts?*

I know my friends—  
they don't think about the shapes souls take  
or what happens to them  
after.

They live in a world  
where flowers can't blossom  
from a lost boy  
and love is concrete,  
proven  
with a touch

or a kiss.

I settle for white lies.

*It's just me here—  
but history is all around me.*

**By the beginning of July,**  
there's a space between me  
and my clothes  
that wasn't there before.  
Aunt Žofie slips her finger  
into this new void  
where my skin  
used to ride up against my jeans.  
*I know girls are obsessed  
with thinness.  
But—*

I don't let her finish.  
She needs to know  
I'm not trying  
to wear myself down.

*It's not like that. It must be the work  
I'm doing in the cemetery.  
I'm eating more than ever.*

And I am.  
I'm hungry  
    all  
    the  
time.  
My belly is hollow,  
the way I felt all over

before I took my music back.

I'll eat anything—  
pinches of day-old bread,  
bags of potato chips  
dusted with paprika.  
I suck down strawberries  
until my fingers and jaw  
are a murderous red.

But instead of swelling outward,  
I'm collapsing inward,  
a black hole  
of a girl.

It's almost enough  
to frighten me.

But music never stole from me before.  
I have to trust it  
and the gift  
Rudolf Wassermann put back  
in my hands.



## Chapter Seventeen

**Unlike my parents,**

Benjamin only stops me from playing music  
when I bring the black violin  
to the cemetery's borders.

He tries to take the instrument  
out of my hands  
before I can even raise  
the bow to the strings.

*Dance with me!* Benjamin pleads.

*Play an American song—  
something cheerful,  
something that makes me want to soar  
instead of cry.*

*I haven't danced  
with anyone in years;  
I can't forget how to—  
and I almost have.*

*Dancing  
was one of the best parts  
of living.*

How can I say no to that?  
It would be the greatest tragedy of all  
if a boy like Benjamin  
forgot how to dance.

**I set aside the black violin**

and pick up my phone instead,  
scrolling through track after track  
until I find a song bubbly enough

to satisfy Benjamin.  
We spin  
around and around on Rose Hill,  
carried aloof  
by the gentle waves of music  
as I usually am  
by the sea.  
Our grins flash like stars  
crossing  
an ink-toned sky.  
Our laughter is unafraid;  
it moves between worlds,  
places our hands can't go.  
We don't care who sees us.

(If anyone even can.)

*I'm terrible!*  
Benjamin says—and he is.  
I can tell he never grew into his feet.  
He trips over them,  
the way I trip  
over loose stones.

*I'm worse!* I call back.  
(This is how you know  
you're close to someone.  
When you can  
insult yourself  
and they'll do the same,  
just to soften the blow  
of your truth.)

The two of us dance

until I'm breathless  
and he pretends to be.  
We collapse  
on the velvet-soft grass,  
our laughter drifting in wisps  
up to the clouds.

**We escape afterward,**  
into the city  
that's both an adventure  
and a cage,  
depending on the day,  
the decade,  
the century.

I swing my arms at my sides  
as we walk toward the river,  
hoping my fingers  
will graze Benjamin's  
accidentally,  
on purpose.  
I don't know why  
I want to touch him all the time.  
It's like I need to confirm  
Benjamin is real  
because I haven't been  
this close to anyone  
ever.

(Let alone a boy.)

**I haven't acted like a tourist**  
since I arrived.  
Gawking at this city

feels strange  
when it's only by chance  
I didn't grow up here myself.  
It must be stranger still for Benjamin,  
who has seen Prague  
change her clothes, her hair,  
her outlines and curves  
so many times  
she might as well be  
someone new.

We step into a puppeteer's shop  
along with people  
chattering like sparrows  
in English, German, French.  
Marionettes dangle from the ceiling:  
goblins and aristocrats made of elm,  
Charlie Chaplins and witches,  
princesses with faded-sky wings.  
They're all equal here  
in this magical kingdom.

Puppets, like the rest of Prague,  
have decided on democracy.

**Benjamin bumps against a princess**  
in summer blue.

She shakes wildly on her strings,  
as if she couldn't resist dancing  
for such a beautiful boy.  
He gasps,  
surprised  
by his own ability to change

the world.

(I'm a little surprised myself.)

The shopkeeper looks over,  
his face already crinkled  
in displeasure,  
ready to banish me  
with a flick of his hand  
for mishandling his creations.  
But I'm too far away  
to have moved the marionette,  
and he returns to work  
with a shrug, grumbling:  
*It was only the wind.*

(How many times  
has he repeated that lie?  
How many ghosts  
have passed through this shop?)

I bite my lip,  
holding back a laugh.  
And beside me, Benjamin  
clamps a hand  
over his own mouth.

I whisper:  
*Let's go*  
before our shared giggles  
have the chance to bubble up.



## Chapter Eighteen

*How many other ghosts  
like you are there?* I ask Benjamin.  
It's an idea that can only  
be raised in sunlight.  
Dead children  
don't make for polite conversation.  
*Like the strawberry girl—  
Pearl.*

Benjamin looks away from me.  
*There aren't as many hauntings  
as you might think.  
It's just Pearl, myself,  
and two other boys—  
both younger  
than I am.*

*When did they...?*  
I can't bring myself to finish  
the question.

*The twins died  
a few months after I did, taken  
by the flu in 1918.  
Pearl was lost  
during the war.  
Prague doesn't try to cling  
to its dead.  
We're only still here because...  
Benjamin's mouth  
snaps*

shut,  
a door being slammed  
by an angry hand.

*Because?* I prompt.

But Benjamin  
shakes his head  
and walks ahead of me,  
his expression  
masked  
by the glare of the sunlight.

Whatever unfinished business  
that binds Benjamin  
to this city  
belongs to him—  
and him alone.  
He doesn't need to share it  
with me.

But how much he conceals  
still worries me.  
I tell him *everything*.  
What isn't  
he telling *me*?

**I buy a *trdelník***  
from a street vendor,  
fighting against my growling belly.  
Instead of a papery cone,  
my ice cream is wrapped in cinnamon dough.  
It coats my fingers with brown sugar,  
like pixie dust.

I offer it to Benjamin  
before I remember  
he can't share it with me.  
He smiles nonetheless,  
his eyes lost  
in the waves of his dimples.  
I'm relieved  
Benjamin looks like a boy again,  
and not  
a collection of secrets.

(Maybe he just likes his privacy.  
Maybe I am looking for darkness  
where there is none.)

Benjamin says:  
*How long will you stay with your aunt?  
Or will you live here from now on?*

Does he sound hopeful?  
I'd like to think  
he wants me by his side  
as much as I want him  
by mine.  
But I have to tell him  
the truth.  
*I'll be gone by September.  
I have to go back to school  
in Miami.  
And my father hates Prague—  
he'd never let me stay.*

But August  
seems like a lifetime away

and I don't want to go back  
to a home  
that fits me poorly,  
a pair of sandals  
I've long outgrown.  
Not when I've only just reclaimed  
my music  
and made a friend  
like Benjamin.

**My simplest daydreams**  
become the biggest lies of all.

I dream  
I can bring Benjamin  
back to Miami with me,  
as if he's a postcard.  
I dream  
he can walk the halls  
of my high school,  
study art in New York,  
open a gallery someday  
like my aunt.

I dream  
we can grow up  
and grow old  
together,  
sharing our hearts,  
inside jokes,  
decades.

Is that what he would want,  
if it were possible?

**The cold ice cream**

sets my mouth aflame  
when I sink my teeth into it.  
*You were scared to talk to me  
at first.*

*Why?*

(I need to ask:  
I need to know.)

Benjamin worries his lip  
between his teeth.

When he speaks again,  
his voice is hoarse,  
as if it's coming  
from a great distance.

*Herr Wassermann  
prefers the other children and me  
not to talk to strangers  
or go too far from his house.  
I stay with him,  
so I must respect  
his rules.*

I suck the last of the strawberry ice cream  
off my fingers,  
trying to draw out the sweetness.

(I already want more.)

*You live with Rudolf Wassermann?  
The same Wassermann  
who gave me the violin?*

*I do.*

*Me...*

*and the other three children.*

*But Wassermann  
isn't dead like us.  
I don't think  
he's ever died.  
I don't think  
he ever will.*

Is that a comfort  
or a curse?  
It's hard to say.  
*Why didn't you tell me  
you knew Wassermann?*

Benjamin shrugs,  
stuffing his hands  
into the pockets of his trousers.  
*I'm so used to keeping secrets.  
It's a habit  
I'm finding  
hard to break.*



## Chapter Nineteen

### **Benjamin and I don't cross Charles Bridge**

to reach Staroměstské náměstí:  
the Old Town Square.

It's too crowded  
with tourists,  
their elbows sharp,  
and their English sharper.

Benjamin takes me over the other bridge—  
the one that's too plain  
for anyone to care about.

No statues guard it  
and cars speed past,  
reminding us  
what year it is.

*I call this one  
the Quiet Bridge, I say.  
I don't know the real name.*

The smile Benjamin gifts me with  
is golden.

*I like "Quiet Bridge"  
better than its real name.  
It sounds much more magical.  
Like a place a good queen  
might make her home.*

***You talk about magic all the time.***  
*Is it easier to believe in it  
when you're magic yourself? I ask.*

Benjamin  
closes his eyes,  
searching the world inside of him.

*I think it's harder.*

*Because magic feels ordinary  
and miracles*

*seem so far away.*

*You're more of a miracle  
than I am.*

I laugh—

I'm not that kind of girl.

*How can you say*

*I'm a miracle?*

*You're a Jew.*

*You're alive in Prague  
and you see me.*

*You see everything.*

*Why isn't that a miracle?*

### **The buildings on the other side of Quiet Bridge**

lean into each other,  
gossips interested  
in the sight of Benjamin and me,  
the living and the dead  
gathered so close together.

But the tourists and shopkeepers  
don't question  
the presence of a teenage girl,  
her hand  
wrapped around nothing  
but the warm summer air.

**Every wall,**  
brick,  
stone  
tells a story,  
and Benjamin  
can read them all.

He places  
his hands  
over the bullet holes  
scarring  
the nearest building's façade.  
*There was a fight here,  
at the end of the war.  
The people of Prague  
finally pushed back  
against the Nazis.  
They even  
managed to win.*

Of course Benjamin was here,  
watching that last struggle.  
He must have been here  
for almost everything.  
*Did you cheer for them?*  
Benjamin nods.  
The rose  
sprouting from his cheek  
is a blue  
far deeper  
than the waters of the Vltava.  
*I did.  
But I wish*

*they had fought back sooner.*

*I wish*

*they could have risen up*

*the day the Germans*

*first marched into the city.*

*And I wish*

*I could have risen up*

*beside them.*

**My whole face turns**

the color of

strawberry ice cream

the longer I watch Benjamin.

I want to stroke his hair,

the way I caress

the black violin's

slender neck.

He's talking

about war;

I'm thinking

about nonsense.

What's wrong

with me?

**We haven't gone far**

when Benjamin grabs at my arm,

trying to wrench me back

from whatever mistake

I'm about to make.

*Ilana, please!*

*Please don't walk on them.*

His eyes look like clouds

about to break open  
with rain  
as he points to the sidewalk.  
*Below you.*  
*It's...*

I reach down;  
the marble stones  
warm the starfish of my fingers.  
I'm about to ask Benjamin  
why he's so upset  
when I see it for myself.  
There are Hebrew letters  
etched on the pathway.  
They are even more faded  
than the writing  
in Rose Hill's cemetery.  
These are *matzevot*  
and people walk over them daily,  
oblivious  
to their meaning.

*Who did this?* I whisper.  
*Was it the Nazis?*

*No,* says Benjamin.  
*It was the communists.*  
*They needed building material*  
*and there were no other stones*  
*to be found.*  
*So they took the matzevot from a village*  
*and laid them here.*  
*They said*

*it didn't matter,  
because there was no one left  
to care for that cemetery  
or the people in it.*

I never expected  
Benjamin and me  
to have monsters in common.  
Years and oceans separate us,  
and only half my family  
claims this city as their own.  
But the communists  
stole from him too.

*I'm sorry, I tell Benjamin,  
as if I'm the one  
who ripped up the headstones  
and planted them here  
like a briar patch.*

*This isn't right.  
Someone  
should bring the headstones  
back to their village.*

*It isn't right, says Benjamin.  
But so many things here aren't.*



## Chapter Twenty

### **I wake to the sound of rain**

pounding against the roof,  
relentless and gray.  
I won't be able to get anything done  
in the cemetery,  
but I still run up Rose Hill  
in search of Benjamin.

Only the trees greet me;  
ghosts must be mindful of the weather too.  
A thorny vine of disappointment  
snakes  
through  
the pit of my stomach.

I shouldn't rely on a boy  
to fill the space inside me.  
But Benjamin isn't just a boy—  
he's my friend.  
And slowly,  
I feel him becoming  
something more.

### **I follow Aunt Žofie to her gallery,**

(exam books in hand)  
hoping  
she believes it's the weather  
making me quiet, sullen,  
lost  
in my own head.  
I'm caged-tiger restless.

I flip through my study guides  
for the first time in weeks,  
but I can't concentrate.  
The more I pace,  
the more irritated I become  
with my aunt's pretend worlds.

I'm tired of dreams;  
I want something real  
the way most people  
crave sugar, coffee,  
and other vices.

I tell Aunt Žofie  
I need to stretch my legs  
and am out the door  
before she can give me  
a reason to stay.

I need to know more  
about Benjamin and Pearl,  
about the forgotten world  
they lived in.

I can think  
of only one place  
to start.

### **Inside the Pinkas Synagogue**

(built in 1535)

there are names  
painted on the walls  
in red and black ink.

They're a chapter  
in the history of my People,  
but I can't read them all.  
There are too many—  
    78,000  
victims of the Nazis,  
    Czechs and Slovaks  
murdered, all because  
    they were Jews.

This is what it's like to be Jewish  
in Europe.  
Every beautiful thing  
has horror buried under it.

I'm always walking on bones.

**The rooms upstairs**  
are much worse.

Inside rows of glass cases  
    (like coffins)  
are drawings from the war.  
Most of the children  
who made them  
didn't survive the Shoah;  
only their watercolor fairy tales did.

The pictures  
tell stories of lives  
unfinished.  
But one catches my eye  
    (and my heart)  
more than the others:

a drawing of a princess  
in a tower, roses winding  
through her long dark hair.  
And the name of the child  
who made it?  
Pearl.

Did the little ghost draw this?  
I don't know,  
but now I wish  
I'd never come here at all.

**Dad and Aunt Žofie didn't warn me**  
about any of this.  
I don't think they understood  
they *needed* to.  
The specter of a different darkness  
hangs over  
my father and aunt.

The tanks that rolled through this city  
when *they* were children  
arrived from  
    Russia,  
    Poland,  
    Hungary,  
not Germany.  
Their enemies marched  
under the banner of the hammer and sickle,  
not the spider-shaped mark of the swastika.

**What I inherited**  
from *both* of my parents:  
a healthy fear

of men in uniform.



## Chapter Twenty-One

**I slip outside into the rain again,**  
feeling like half a ghost myself.  
Because that's the other part  
of being a Jew in Europe—  
each step I take  
is in defiance of everyone  
who didn't want me here.

I should be angry,  
but all I can feel is sadness  
burrowing into my bones.

I think maybe  
the anger  
will roar to life  
when I'm least expecting it to.

**I walk to the Staronová synagoga,**  
the Old-New Synagogue,  
hoping to find  
evidence of Benjamin and Pearl  
that isn't a funeral dirge.

Myths are locked  
behind the walls of this place.  
Twelve stone vines  
for the twelve tribes of Israel  
    (ten lost, with no bread crumbs  
    to follow home)  
scale the entryway.  
Rabbi Loew's clay beast

may still be sleeping  
in the attic.

The synagogue's so old  
I can almost feel it breathe.  
It's like a golem itself,  
crowded with history  
and holy things.

Inside, the glittering chandeliers  
mimic the stars,  
and the arch of the ceiling  
is ancient and strong.

Did Benjamin pray here?  
Did he welcome the Shabbat bride  
through its doors?  
Did he recite Kaddish  
for the lost,  
Mi Shebeirach  
for the sick?

I try to picture him  
standing in front of the ark,  
his cheeks pink,  
his chest rising up  
and down  
as he swayed in time  
with his prayers.  
Thinking about what he was like  
when he was alive  
is so much better  
than thinking about his end—  
however it came,

whatever form it took.

**There is a cemetery**  
behind the synagogue,  
where the *matzevot* huddle together,  
bracing for a storm.

I circle the graves.  
I recognize all the carvings now:  
lions and candelabras,  
hands and crowns  
and six-sided stars.

No one hacked down  
the *matzevot* here  
like they were trees  
that needed to be felled.  
This cemetery is intact, whole,  
in a way that Benjamin's isn't.

**Standing beneath a skeletal tree**  
at the rear of the cemetery  
is none other  
than Rudolf Wassermann,  
umbrella in hand.  
A cigarette  
dangles from his mouth,  
weeping ash  
onto the broken pavement.

We stare at each other  
above the forest of headstones.

*You can't smoke in here, I say.*

*It's against the law.*

Wassermann blinks.

The gesture looks forced,  
like he's only now realizing  
that he should.

*Oh my! I'm so sorry.*

He pinches the top of his cigarette  
between two fingers  
to extinguish it.

I gasp.

*Wait—*

But when the dead cigarette  
falls from his hand,  
there's no blister  
or burn  
left behind.

The fire doesn't mark  
Rudolf Wassermann.

He asks:

*Would you like  
to get out of the rain,  
have a cup of tea with me?  
This really isn't the weather  
for sightseeing.*

(I can't argue  
with that.)



## Chapter Twenty-Two

**The café Wassermann chooses is elegant.**

The blue and gold spirals  
painted on the walls  
remind me of the synagogue  
I just left.

Wassermann and I aren't followed  
by the whisper of pens  
and the flutter of paper  
as he leads me  
to the back of the café.  
The room around us  
is empty,  
in spite of the *Reserved* signs  
on almost every table.

Wassermann draws a chair back for me  
and I sit,  
letting the edges of the tablecloth  
drape over my legs.  
Even a hint of winter  
is enough to make me shiver.

***Benjamin lives with you.***

It's a statement I open with,  
not a question.  
*Pearl too.*

Wassermann folds his hands,  
forming one of the city's many spires.  
*Yes. They stay with me*

*when the sun goes down  
and it's no longer safe  
for children to walk the streets.  
Starlight is cold  
and one can't dine  
on night air alone.  
Ilana, you must understand—  
the world has tried  
to brush those children  
off its coattails  
and leave them  
in the shadows.  
I do what I can  
for the souls  
everyone else has forgotten.  
Everyone...  
except for you.  
You like Benjamin,  
don't you?*

*He's a good friend.  
My voice is smooth  
as buttercream,  
betraying nothing.*

**A waiter**  
brings us *lipový čaj*,  
linden tea,  
in porcelain cups that were new  
when Benjamin was still alive.

Wassermann  
sips at his thoughtfully;

it brings a flush to his pale cheeks.  
He has the look of a man  
who's been on the brink  
of illness  
for a long time.

*I think it's wonderful  
you and Benjamin  
have found each other, he says.  
The other children  
are so much younger than him!  
He needed a friend  
his own age.*

**The man with no shadow**  
leans forward suddenly,  
a spy  
about to impart a secret.  
*You must have received my violin.*

*It's beautiful, I say.  
But I don't understand  
why you've given it  
to me.*

Wassermann throws back his head,  
laughing.  
The entire world  
must be a joke to someone  
who just might live forever.  
*You can make music  
whenever you like now.  
Isn't that  
what you wished for?*

**I want to believe**

someone understands me effortlessly  
    (the way Benjamin does)  
and that Wassermann knows  
I'm not a piece of music  
too complicated  
to be read,  
the way my parents  
believe I am.

Does it matter  
if the creatures  
who see the whole of me  
aren't human  
(anymore)?

**The rain drums her fingers**  
on the café's gilded windows,  
impatient  
for me to return to Aunt Žofie.  
She'll be wondering  
where I am.  
I've been gone  
too long  
already.

*Thank you for the tea, I say.  
And the conversation.*

*Before you go,  
I have something else for you.*  
Wassermann takes several wrinkled pages  
out of his coat pocket,  
another gift

I can't repay him for.  
*"The Last Rose of Summer"*  
*is one of the most difficult pieces*  
*for violin.*  
*But I know*  
*you're capable of mastering it.*

I gather the sheet music,  
crushing it  
against my chest.  
I already want  
to bring the song to life.  
*I'll do my best.*

*And you'll succeed.*  
Wassermann raises his cup,  
a farewell toast.  
*You know where to find me—*  
*and Benjamin.*  
*Come see us anytime.*  
*We both enjoy your company*  
*so very much.*

**The battery on my phone**  
dips down  
into warning yellow,  
then desperate red.  
It begs me to answer  
the messages piling up,  
letters from a past  
I'm struggling  
to connect with.

I spin lies

for my parents' benefit.  
I tell them how much  
I'm (not) studying,  
how much thinking  
I have (not) done  
about my future.

I've stopped  
sending photos to Sarah and Martina.  
I don't care  
    (anymore)  
about whether or not  
I see theirs.

No picture can explain  
my descent into places  
so dark they shimmer.

I leave my phone behind,  
along with my exam books,  
their pages dusty  
thanks to my lack of attention.

I don't care.  
I have better things to do.



Interlude II:  
***Wassermann***

**You can divide**  
the whole of the world  
into two types of girls:  
girls who say yes  
and girls who say no.

I am only interested  
in girls  
who say yes.

Girls who say yes  
become queens  
ruling distant lands.  
Songs  
about their bravery

and beauty  
will fall from the lips  
of troubadours  
for centuries.

Girls who say no  
remain where they are,  
stranded in the mud  
and in the smallness of their villages.

They marry the baker's boy,  
grow old and coarse.

And when  
they finally crumble  
beneath the weight of decades,  
no one remembers them  
for very long.

I have been  
at the center  
of so many tales  
about girls who say yes.

I am  
the wizard,  
the fairy godfather,  
the call to adventure  
begging children  
to leave home behind.

I am  
the keeper of enchantment;  
I snap my fingers  
(fiat lux!)  
and the light gathers around me  
like so many fireflies.

Or so it used to.

**My magic has faded,**  
my eyes have dimmed,  
my stomach growls,  
my bones *ache*.

The unfulfilled potential  
bottled  
in the souls of the four  
dead children  
who reside in my house  
doesn't sate my hunger now.  
I haven't had a decent supper  
in *years*.

The children fade  
a little more each day.  
Soon,  
they will disappear,  
the last of them swallowed  
not by me,  
but by oblivion.

I've tried to find  
more dead children,  
their souls stuffed full  
of bright wonders  
and dreams of tomorrows  
they'll never see.  
They fill the hole in me,  
as the souls of adults  
(their hopes gone stale  
with age)

never quite do.

But in the twenty-first century,  
children are more likely  
to grow up.  
Vaccines,  
peace,  
simple human kindness  
steal  
countless  
meals from me.

And boys and girls  
with breath still in their lungs  
refuse to follow me home.  
They distrust  
the crepuscular glow of my eyes,  
my missing shadow,  
the simple fact  
that I am a stranger.

(I can hardly blame them.)

**I need more, more, *more*.**

But first,  
I need company  
with a heartbeat—  
Ilana, the pretty girl  
whose hunger  
and love of music  
matches my own.

If I can have her at my side,  
I know I will not starve.

She can help me  
fetch living children,  
as her ancestors  
fetched water from the Vltava.  
They'll trust Ilana—  
her longing,  
her songs,  
all the ways she's similar  
to *them*.

Their memories,  
their possibilities  
will be enough  
to sustain us both.  
Even a girl  
like Ilana  
can become immortal  
if she eats enough souls.  
And who would turn down  
eternity?

Together,  
Ilana and I  
are going to live  
*forever*.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### **It's done.**

There are no more branches to cut,  
no more rotting leaves,  
no more stinging nettles  
masking their bite  
with gentle purple flowers.  
The cemetery is finally open  
to the sky.

I tap  
my hedge trimmers  
against one ankle,  
my skin dawn pink  
and blistered from the nettles.

Benjamin traces  
the mossy outline of a name  
on one of the *matzevot*  
before his hand  
travels to the Torah crown  
above it.  
*His name was Jan Lederer—  
my teacher.  
He was so old that he bent  
like a willow in the wind.  
We used to say  
he helped Rabbi Loew  
build the golem.*

*Who else is here  
that you knew? I ask.*

Benjamin's voice  
becomes a grand map.  
He lays out not streets  
but lives,  
dozens of red strings  
that wrapped themselves  
around his  
(still)  
beating heart.

We've walked halfway  
across the cemetery  
when the roses  
on the backs of Benjamin's hands  
wilt, as if the sun  
has stolen  
the last of their color.  
It hurts to see;  
they were so vivid  
just a moment ago.  
*This must be boring,  
hearing about  
all these people  
you'll never meet.*

I tell him:  
*No.*

I tell him:  
*Never.*

I tell him:  
*I want to know everything.*

**A piece of Prague's magic**  
must come from its art museums,  
and Benjamin  
wants me to visit them all.  
He whispers instructions  
on how to punch my tram ticket  
and which routes to take.

He shows me  
the masters of his craft,  
our feet making music  
    (as his never did before)  
on the marble floors of grand galleries.  
We have a new mission now:  
to see everything marvelous  
in the city that Benjamin's bones  
still call home.

Our minds  
are alight  
with beauty—  
the blue diamond skyline,  
the stained glass windows  
with fairy tales  
fitted into the panels.

I pose  
beside a painted woman  
    (*Princess Hyacinth*  
    by Alphonse Mucha,  
    1911)  
who lives in a world  
built from stars, lilies, irises.

The thrust of my chest  
is exaggerated;  
my head is raised  
like an empress's.

Benjamin keeps his laughter  
bottled up,  
champagne stifled  
by a cork.  
It tastes  
like the stars.

**The museums close**  
as the sky turns the color of dust  
and we dash  
over the Legion Bridge  
and down the winding stairs  
to Střelecký Island.

The thin strip of land  
straddles the Vltava  
between the two halves of the city.  
Careworn oaks  
shield Benjamin and me.  
There are so many picnic blankets  
beneath our feet  
we have to dance around them.

Giant swans drift,  
unhurried,  
across the glass-still water of the river.  
But they aren't real swans—  
they're paddleboats,  
their elegant bodies

only made of plastic.  
Yet I can't stop watching them.  
A boy  
leans over  
the edge of a swan boat,  
splashing the girl beside him.  
She shrieks in false outrage.  
Their laughter is a song  
that makes my heart ache.

These are the things  
I won't ever be able to do with Benjamin.  
It shouldn't hurt.  
(But it does.)

**My face begins to glow;**  
it must look even brighter  
than the fairy lights  
strung from the rafters  
of Aunt Žofie's kitchen.  
*You must think  
these boats are so stupid.  
It's not like they're real swans,  
I mumble to Benjamin.*

The blue-eyed boy wraps his arms  
around his knees;  
he's never looked so young.  
*I like them.  
They look like they could fly away,  
taking their passengers  
to a wintry place  
white as their feathers.*

*Maybe we could  
go with them,  
together.*

**I have to change the subject,**  
otherwise I'm going to confess  
the only thing  
I don't want Benjamin to know.

(Yet.)

*You know Yiddish, don't you?  
My mom doesn't speak it,  
but it's important to so many Jews.  
Teach me a word.  
Teach me everything  
about the way  
the world used to be.*

Mishpachah—  
*means family.*

Gute neshome—  
*a good soul.*

Emmis—  
*the truth.*

Benjamin speaks slowly,  
as if he's pulling the words  
from somewhere  
deep inside himself, a place  
(half-forgotten or maybe  
locked away)  
he hasn't ventured into  
for years.

*Now you go, Ilana.*

*Teach me something new—*

*something  
in Spanish.*

The words and phrases  
I give him  
mean the most  
to me, to my mother,  
maybe even to those  
who came before us.

Acere—  
*a friend.*

El gao—  
*home.*

Arriba de la bola—  
*to be the greatest.*

***Tell me, I say again.***

*Tell me about who  
you used to be.*

(This game is dangerous.  
The more I know about Benjamin,  
the closer to him  
I want to be.

I tell myself he's dust;  
I shouldn't want to be around him  
the way I do.  
But it doesn't work,  
even though the wind  
could steal Benjamin from me  
whenever it chooses.)

Roses burst  
in violet clusters

(the shade  
of all things hidden)  
on both of Benjamin's wrists.  
He smiles, adrift in a memory  
that flows from his lips  
more smoothly than before.  
*My father used to force me out of bed  
before the sun was even up  
to go to heder.  
I didn't mind it.  
I liked how quiet the streets were  
when I walked alongside my friends.  
I thought I was seeing the world  
the way it was meant to be seen,  
without anything in the way.  
Do you go to heder, Ilana?*

*Yes and no.  
Mom makes me go to Hebrew class  
on Sundays.  
I used to pretend to hate it.  
I thought that's what you had to do  
when you were thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.  
But I didn't.  
I still don't.*



## Chapter Twenty-Four

**Pearl appears beside us,**

sucking her thumb.

Chocolate is smeared

(impossibly—

but I've given up

trying to explain

magic,

even to myself)

on her front teeth.

This is the first time

I've seen her and Benjamin

side by side.

I pull in a sharp breath,

startled

by the difference between them.

Pearl is a black-and-white photograph of a girl,

her edges smudged,

her roses pale and fine as mist.

If I touched them,

would they crumble?

Would *she*?

Pearl points

at the sun's reflection in the river;

it is red as a wound.

*You have to come home, Benjamin—*

*it's almost dark!*

*Onkel Wassermann'll be worried*

*if we don't get back.*

I ask:

*Could I come with you?  
I'd like to see your house.*

Soon, Benjamin says.  
But his promise feels brittle,  
an ash vow.  
I can't say *why* either.  
Pearl and the blue-eyed boy  
leave without looking back,  
the girl-child  
swinging her arms in time  
with her whistling,  
Benjamin's skin weeping  
rose petals that darken  
with each step he takes.

**I shouldn't follow them to Old Town.**  
It's rude, like peeking through a curtain  
at what I'm not meant to see.

But if I knew  
what Benjamin was keeping from me,  
I might  
be able to help him  
the way  
he's helped me.

My shadow sneaks behind me  
as I chase the ghosts,  
quiet  
as a cat.

I run  
on the tips of my toes,  
trying to mimic it.

It's not difficult to follow the dead.  
All I have to do is track the shivers,  
the sudden  
stops  
the living make  
whenever Benjamin  
and Pearl  
pass through them.

**As always, the black house is waiting**  
and so is its owner.  
Wassermann isn't a large man,  
yet he takes up the entire doorway.  
That's just how magic is.  
It expands to fill  
the space around it.

I hide  
behind  
the nearest building,  
letting the red bricks  
conceal my pink cheeks  
and the tangle  
of my dark hair.

(I wish these walls  
could tell me  
everything they've seen,  
everything I've *missed*.)  
The sunset refuses to touch  
Wassermann's black house.  
Its wood paneling doesn't shine;  
its windows don't gleam.

It's outside of time,  
like everything extraordinary.

Wassermann catches Pearl  
in his arms,  
fitting her against  
the bony notch of his hip.

She laughs  
(at first)  
as he bounces her up  
and down.  
But the longer he does,  
the jerkier the movements become,  
the more her gaze is like Benjamin's—  
rabbit-like,  
afraid of what might happen next.

Benjamin keeps his blue eyes  
on the cobblestones,  
using the toe of his shoe  
    (a hundred years old and counting)  
to sketch designs in the dirt.  
I can't tell if he is talking  
or if Wassermann  
is talking *over* him.  
He looks too small,  
too young,  
too muted  
to be the boy  
I sat with by the water.  
    (But I know  
    they are one

and the same.)

Finally, Benjamin marches inside,  
a tin soldier  
someone has wound up  
and set  
into motion.

**I stay where I am for a long time,**  
my thoughts howling,  
my heart frozen, like the winter  
that never really arrives  
in Miami.

I *did* see something  
I wasn't supposed to.

But I don't know  
what it means.

**When I was thirteen,**  
my parents and I  
drove to Disney World,  
fleeing a hurricane.

The magic there  
was packaged,  
perfectly choreographed,  
frothy as the carbonated drinks  
that crackled on my tongue.  
It didn't creep  
through the cracks  
and secret spaces of the world,  
like moss growing

between broken slabs of concrete.  
That kind of magic  
didn't ask for blood  
or tears.  
It simply *was*.

So when the hurricane  
struck Orlando  
instead of Miami,  
I wasn't sad to be denied  
Disney's plastic wonder.  
I sat by the light of a tea candle,  
listening to the rain  
scratch at our windows,  
a beast  
asking to be let in.

Aunt Žofie  
told me the truth  
my first morning at Rose Cottage—  
real magic  
won't ever be safe.  
That means it isn't  
what most people look for.

But it's the only type of magic  
I can believe in.

**Rose Cottage is still empty**  
by the time I return.  
The shadows that spring,  
    leap,  
    dance  
in its corners are playful

and light-footed.

I creep  
into my aunt's studio,  
retrieving the black violin.  
My best chance to make sense of things  
is with a song.

I float  
so far from here, from *now*,  
thanks to the passacaglia  
stirring  
on the strings of the violin  
that I almost miss  
the witch-wail of the front door  
as it announces  
Aunt Žofie's arrival.

I stop playing  
    (just in time)  
and hide the violin again.  
But resentment  
simmers inside me.

I shouldn't have to stop at all.

**There are no Shabbat candles**  
in my aunt's cupboards.  
I have to make do  
with a mismatched set:  
one made of beeswax,  
the other white as the snow  
I've never seen.

I light both

beside the window  
as night settles  
over Aunt Žofie's garden.

I move my hands  
over the candles,  
sweeping up their brilliance,  
drawing it into me.

*Baruch ata Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,  
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav  
v'zivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Aunt Žofie watches me quietly.  
She may not understand,  
but she knows  
how important the ritual is to me—  
like the cemetery,  
like my ghost,  
like the music I can't admit  
I'm still playing.

I hope that in the black house,  
Pearl is lighting candles herself,  
and Benjamin  
is helping her  
welcome the Shabbat queen.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### **Benjamin must not know**

I followed him and Pearl through Old Town;  
he is all smiles  
when he greets me in the cemetery  
on Sunday.

*I want you to meet the boys  
I've known for so long  
they're almost my little brothers, Benjamin says.  
Will you let me take you to them?*

I laugh my yes.  
What was I so afraid of on Friday?  
Benjamin must be happy  
in the black house,  
even if his existence  
isn't perfect,  
even if Wassermann is stricter  
than he might like.  
My parents are the same way.

I let Benjamin lead me  
through the garden, hungry  
                  (always hungry now)  
to be part of his  
                  (after)  
life.

**I fly down the road,**  
the concrete  
sizzling, popping

under the wheels of Aunt's Žofie's  
mint-colored bicycle.

The black violin is in the basket;  
its strings  
try to sing  
as it rattles in its case.

Benjamin sits behind me  
and for the first time,

I can *feel*

his wrist digging into my hip,  
the swell of his belly  
fitting into the small of my back.

Am I imagining things?

Have I remembered Benjamin to life?

Or has the blue-eyed boy himself  
recalled:

how to be made of breath and bone,  
how to fit an arm around a girl's waist,  
how to be part of a city  
that moved on without him  
in the summer heat?

I don't know.

But maybe one day,  
Benjamin will fool time itself  
and it will allow him  
back into Prague,  
solid enough  
for me to wrap myself  
around properly.

**Steadying my heartbeat,**

I follow the map  
Benjamin murmurs  
in my ear.  
We pass under Charles Bridge  
and into another park  
beside the river.

Two  
(dead)  
children stand  
in the shadow of a tree  
so old  
it could be the same one  
Queen Libuše sat beneath  
when she met her husband,  
the plowman  
who would be king.

I wave  
at Benjamin's near-brothers.  
Their eyes  
    (deep and brown  
    as spring earth)  
widen.

These children are much younger  
than the boy I can  
    (nearly)  
call mine;  
they're only nine  
    or ten.  
They're dimmer than Benjamin is,  
winking in and out

like stars  
as I stare at them.

But their clothes  
remind me of his:  
crisp white shirts,  
dark trousers,  
their socks ruffled,  
their kipot lopsided.

Did the twins  
plan every wrinkle  
in their slacks to match?  
Did they intend to be  
such perfect mirrors?  
Or were they born this way  
in the twentieth century's early days?

**In Miami,**

I would have been so jealous of these boys.  
I'd never had a friend so close  
that I couldn't tell  
where he began  
and I ended  
until Benjamin.

Maybe he and I  
are supposed to be twins.  
Maybe we were,  
in some other life.  
Maybe our souls  
were hidden away  
inside birds  
or fauns

to keep us safe  
from a witch,  
a viper,  
a plague.  
Maybe we walked  
the streets of a different city,  
in another time and place,  
together,  
just like we do now.

***I'm Lior, says the first boy.***  
*And my brother*  
*is Issur.*

Lior bounces,  
his soul  
a shiny red balloon  
ready to float away  
into the July skyline.  
But the roses growing  
under his rumpled collar  
are in a sad state,  
just like Pearl's.  
They contain  
only a hint of sunshine yellow.  
*Onkel Wassermann*  
*told us all about you.*

*He says*  
*you're going to be our friend.*  
*Is that true?*  
Issur's words have gravity,  
a heaviness

that his twin's do not.

*Of course, I promise.  
Any friend of Benjamin's  
is a friend of mine.*

### **Issur and Lior**

form the ends  
of each other's sentences,  
a ring of never-ending boyhood  
and all the light that comes with it.

But girlhood is different.  
It comes with pain—  
the bite of my ruby slippers  
against the backs of my ankles,  
the hard snap of rhinestone nails  
on the summit of my kneecap,  
my scalp prickling  
as I bleached my hair  
when I was fourteen.

Pain like that turns pleasant;  
you start thinking of it  
as an accomplishment.  
It always goes along  
with prettiness.  
And we've been told:  
nothing is better than that.

### **The twins race back**

and forth  
across the park.  
Their *payos* strike their cheeks

as they wave imaginary swords  
at an equally imaginary enemy.

Boys in Miami  
wear their hair the same way.  
The twins  
wouldn't be out of place  
in this day and age,  
if only they could step  
out of the history  
forming a gulf between them  
and the living.

*Be a monster, Benjamin!*  
the twins yell.  
*Be a monster for us!*

*You're about to see me  
embarrass myself, Ilana.*  
Benjamin laughs,  
pushing his hair back  
in time  
with a gust of wind from the river.  
*Having little brothers  
means relearning  
how to play pretend.*  
*Every time we come  
to the park,  
I become someone different,  
just  
for them—  
a beast or a knight,  
a villain or a hero.*

*Which monster  
should I be?  
Benjamin asks  
the two boys.  
A golem  
run wild?  
You'll have to scrub  
the Name off me.  
A čert?  
Be clever and I might  
let your souls get away.*

A story I read  
in one of Aunt Žofie's books  
unspools  
on my tongue.  
*You could be  
a vodník.  
A river spirit.*

The three ghosts  
shudder  
to a stop,  
marionettes whose strings  
I've cut  
with only a single word.

A single *monster*.

But why?

**Then Benjamin speaks**  
like I never did.  
*I'll be a golem!*

*A friend turned enemy.*

*Come!*

*Let's play.*

I can't join their game  
without looking unhinged.  
There's only so much laughter  
I can share  
with invisible boys  
before someone questions it.  
I sit on the nearest bench,  
grateful for a moment alone—  
which means that someone  
has to come  
and interrupt it.

**Rudolf Wassermann**

takes a seat beside me.  
He may not have a shadow,  
but he's become mine.  
He wears tacky sunglasses today,  
dark as his violin.  
The left lens is scratched—  
another imperfection  
I can add  
to the list of his flaws.

An old woman passes us,  
stirring  
the hem of Wassermann's coat.  
She bumps against his knee, saying:  
*Promiňte*  
as she departs.

The man with no shadow  
answers my question  
before I can fully shape it.  
*I can be seen if I want to be.*  
*Didn't Benjamin tell you?*  
*I'm not dead,*  
*not buried in the cemetery*  
*alongside*  
*Pearl,*  
*Benjamin,*  
*the twins.*

I ask him:  
*Then what are you?*

*Something*  
*from a much older world.*  
Wassermann props his right ankle  
on his left knee, a song  
    (Piano Quartet No. 3  
    in C minor, Op. 60,  
    "Werther Quartet,"  
    Brahms)  
already on his lips.

I'm not a song;  
I'm not made of half-steps and downbeats.  
So why do I get the feeling  
that if anyone could make me one,  
it's Wassermann?

(It would be so much easier  
than being a girl.)

**Benjamin takes off his cap,**  
shuffling over to the two of us.  
His head is open to the sky.  
I've never seen him  
anything less than pious  
before now.

*Sir*, he says to Wassermann,  
in a tone that actually implies:  
*Your Excellency.*

Wassermann nods,  
an emperor  
acknowledging his subject,  
and Benjamin sits  
next to me.

**With a magician's sleight of hand**  
and a twist of his long fingers,  
Wassermann passes me  
a chocolate square.

It glues my mouth closed  
when I shove it  
between my painted lips.  
But my head is throbbing  
and the sweetness is a buffer  
against the hum of pain  
brought on by the heat.

(Or something else.)

***Why don't you join us***  
*at the opera tomorrow, Ilana?*

Wassermann tips his sunglasses down.  
He carries the oncoming night  
in his eyes.

*I always have tickets.*

*Why, I even have my own box!*

*I often take the children with me—  
you of all people know  
how important music is.*

His smile is unlovely as ever.  
But I haven't been to the opera before;  
it always seemed  
dazzling, jeweled,  
*important.*

I never thought of myself  
as important  
before the cemetery,  
before the black violin,  
before Benjamin,  
before *this*.

I was the sum of my parents' dreams  
and I rarely managed  
to make any of them  
come true.

**Benjamin crushes his hand**

in mine,  
setting fireworks off  
under my skin.  
I can feel his fingers  
pressing  
up

against my own.  
His touch is more  
than a daydream;  
it's no fantasy  
brought on by the heat.

*Please come, Benjamin says.  
You'll enjoy it.*

In my mind,  
I'm already crafting excuses  
    like poems  
to go out tomorrow night.  
Aunt Žofie preaches  
love, passion,  
the more vibrant things in life.  
Maybe she wouldn't mind  
if I went on a date with a boy.

She doesn't need to know  
that the boy  
in question  
is dead.

***Have you learned to play***  
*"The Last Rose of Summer"?*  
*I'd love*  
*to hear your progress,*  
says Wassermann.

I nod,  
taking the violin  
from the bicycle's basket.

The man with no shadow

rises,  
adjusting the slant of my shoulders,  
the position of the bow.  
*Breathe*, he whispers.  
*You*  
*are still*  
*alive.*

**Right now,**  
the only things that matter  
in this broken world are:  
the music I play,  
the shining eyes of the dead boys,  
and the creature  
they call their uncle.

As they watch me  
make my own magic,  
I don't think  
I've ever been happier.

**The light eventually escapes us**  
and I have to say goodbye.  
But before I do,  
Benjamin offers  
to take me back to Rose Hill.

Wassermann frowns at him.  
*Come home soon*, he instructs.

Benjamin nods.  
But he's barely paying attention.  
He can't keep his eyes  
off

of  
*me.*



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**As we reach the guard tower**  
at the beginning of Charles Bridge,  
the first star  
rises over our heads.

Benjamin and I  
    (the ghost and the girl)  
    pause,  
taking in the full expanse of sky,  
a dark sea  
we try to navigate.

*I haven't seen the stars  
in so long, Benjamin breathes.*

    (Or as close to it  
    as he can.)

*I've felt so different  
since you've come to Prague.  
I feel like I'm more than I was,  
more than I've been  
since I was alive.*

*You were always more, I say.  
You just had to remember it.*

**I don't know how to kiss Benjamin.**

Will my lips pass  
through his,  
will I be able to feel his mouth  
against mine,  
will he be able

to feel anything at all?

But I can't wait  
any longer.

*I love you, Benjamin.*

Benjamin stumbles over  
the words that come next—  
he's speaking  
English, German,  
Czech, Yiddish,  
all at once.  
But I can still understand him.

*Ilana, I'm dead.*

*I can't give you anything.*

He turns out  
his pockets.

They are as empty  
as the eyes of the statues  
who watch us  
from their pedestals.

*I don't care that you're dead, I say.*

*You're here, with me.*

*You can read my heart  
like it's yours—  
that's all that matters.*

The boy bites his lip,  
then lowers his head  
as if he's praying.

(He might be.  
I know I am.)

## **Benjamin's kiss travels**

all  
the  
way  
down  
my spine.

The feeling of it grows  
between my ribs  
like his roses—  
sharp, tender, perfect.

His tongue  
speaks a secret language  
to mine,  
and his hands  
brush my shoulder blades,  
making me feel  
as if I have wings.

The kiss lasts  
for his lifetime  
and my unfolding one.  
It reaches lives  
we haven't lived yet,  
and all the ones  
we've forgotten.

When we come back  
down to earth,  
to Prague,  
to *now*,  
I feel like  
someone new.

A flower bursts  
from Benjamin's cheek,  
its scarlet petals  
shattering  
the deep purple of nightfall.

*Was that...*

*Was that all right?*

*Kiss me again*

*and I'll tell you.*

**What does it mean**

for me to have kissed Benjamin  
and not have him crumble  
to dust  
beneath my lips?

How much strange magic  
is waiting for me  
(in Prague,  
in Miami,  
in the world)

if it's possible  
for a ghost's hands  
to feel as strong  
as those of any other boy?

**I stumble into Rose Cottage,**

where Aunt Žofie is preparing dinner.

I need to talk to *someone*  
who has already fallen in love,  
who might know  
what happens next.  
And I can't call my mother.

She'd be furious  
I was spending time with a boy,  
no matter how kind he is.

I ask Aunt Žofie:  
*How old were you  
when you had  
your first kiss?*

**My aunt**  
stops  
stirring the *česnečka*,  
the garlic soup.  
This is our evening ritual;  
she cooks  
while I daydream  
on a chair  
she painted sunflowers on.  
But usually, she is the one  
who starts a conversation—  
not me.

*I was about your age.  
Maybe a little younger, she says.  
It was not long  
after your dad left.  
I felt  
like your father  
had abandoned me.  
I was desperate to shake off  
my sadness, my rage,  
my confusion.*

*I'd go to secret parties*

*where everyone  
did forbidden Western things.  
We wore jeans  
and listened to David Bowie,  
Freddie Mercury,  
singers  
who were more like stories  
come to life  
than men.*

*I didn't know the name  
of the boy  
    (lamppost skinny)  
who kissed me,  
who I kissed back.  
But when we danced together,  
I thought I could fly  
to Paris, London,  
some other land  
where I could be free.*

**I trace the golden outline**  
*of the sunflowers on my chair.  
So you didn't love him?  
This boy you kissed?*

*You don't need to be in love  
to kiss someone.  
But it helps.  
Aunt Žofie's smile  
is more smirk  
when she asks:  
And you?*

I don't blush;  
at sixteen,  
I bet Aunt Žofie  
had kissed dozens of boys.

And by now?

She's probably seen

(and heard  
and done)

it all.

*My first kiss*

*was at a party last year—*

*just like you.*

*I didn't love that boy, though.*

*He was too rough*

*and he didn't love me either.*

I'll take Benjamin's soft kiss

over the one that felt like a forest fire,

the one that tried to

burn

me

up,

remake me

into a girl

I've never been,

all so a boy

wouldn't go to bed

hungry for more.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**The opera ticket arrives**  
under the cloak of daylight,  
the way the black violin did.

I'm dreaming of excuses  
to go out tonight  
when I finally see the note  
Aunt Žofie left behind.  
It peeks out from under a cup  
of fresh hibiscus tea.

*Call your father.*

I groan.

Her instructions are so much less magical  
than anything else  
in my life.

**I recharge my phone,**

but I barely glance  
at the desperate pleas

*(Text me!*

*Email me!*

*Where are you?*

*You haven't posted anything  
in weeks!)*

Martina and Sarah left behind.

What can I say to them?  
What would we even talk about?  
I can't go back to being  
the girl I was  
on the beach.

She's as lost to time  
as Benjamin is.

**I bounce from foot to foot**

as I wait for Dad  
to pick up.

*Hello, Ilana.*

Dad's greeting  
is a sigh.

*I heard*

*you've been*

*running around*

*with some boy*

*and playing music*

*instead of studying.*

**There's no question**

how Dad knows—

Aunt Žofie

must have seen Benjamin,

heard me playing

the black violin.

But why

would she tell my father?

I thought

she was on *my* side!

*Your mother and I*

*expected you to be*

*more responsible than this, Ilana!*

*I didn't want to send you*

*to Prague and now*

*I can see I was right.*

*Now is the time to concentrate  
on important things—  
your grades,  
getting into a good university,  
planning for your future.*

*The course  
you're on  
will make your life small.  
It will be a life of poverty,  
full of struggle,  
and you will have to fight  
for everything,  
the way  
your mom and I  
had to.  
But if you choose wisely now,  
you won't need to.*

**Dad's words are like stones**  
slipped into my pocket,  
weighing me down.  
A month ago,  
two months ago,  
I would have bowed my head,  
and promised to bury  
my dreams.  
I don't now.

*With music in it,  
my life won't ever be small,  
it won't ever be poor.  
And the boy*

*I've been seeing  
understands who I am.  
Why can't you trust  
the choices I make?  
My future  
isn't your past.*

I try to sound fierce,  
like a girl who loves ghosts  
more than she fears them,  
like a girl who has dangerous secrets.  
But my voice doesn't quite rally  
in my defense.

*Ilana—*

I won't listen anymore,  
because I know  
Dad won't listen to *me*.

I hang up the phone,  
tossing it onto the counter.  
There's as much power  
in ending a conversation  
as there is in starting one.

**My blood buzzes.**

If I tried to pour my anger  
into a song,  
the black violin  
might burst into flames.

I can't keep  
myself hidden

any longer.

But my parents will only be happy  
if I'm an unfinished symphony.

And my aunt  
is (apparently) no different.

**I tear**

through Aunt Žofie's closet,  
searching for a gown,  
Cinderella gone mad.

I arm myself with:  
high-heeled shoes  
lipstick red as blood,  
rings as hard  
as my diamond heart.  
I take the opera ticket;  
I leave no note.

My ill-gotten shoes  
cut into my feet.  
But it feels good  
to hurt.



Interlude III:  
***Wassermann***

**You must understand:**  
if the Germans  
had not invaded Prague  
like a mischief of rats,  
I never  
would have gone hungry  
again.

But the Nazis  
took the children  
far from the hill of roses  
by train,  
by truck,  
by bullet,  
and buried them

in icy fields  
far from the Vltava.  
They stole from me  
as they stole  
artwork,  
candlesticks,  
books whose pages  
crumbled like borders  
under siege  
from the museums  
and the homes  
of anyone they deemed  
an *Untermensch*—  
less than human.

(As if humanity  
was anything to be proud of!)

The last child  
*I* took  
was Pearl  
and I have already eaten  
most of her.

But there will be  
new children now,  
thanks to Ilana.

And I am  
*so*  
looking  
forward  
to meeting them.



Third Movement:  
***The Lost Children***

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**The art center in Miami is modern.**

Its glass walls  
reflect a person's own ideas  
back at them.

Sarah, Martina, and I  
left performances  
dreaming  
about what it would be like  
to stand onstage,  
listening to the roar of strings  
and the applause that followed.

But Prague's State Opera house  
leaves no room  
for anyone's thoughts.  
It's too crowded with memories,  
men in suits  
    (soft as Benjamin's kiss)  
and women wearing jewels  
in shades of moonlight.

I'm here  
because of music.  
I'm here  
because of Benjamin.  
I'm here  
because a man with no shadow  
cares more about  
what I want  
than my own family does.

## **Seeing the dead kids and Wassermann**

lined up beside the grand staircase  
makes me sway in my  
    (stolen)  
heels.

Lior and Issur have matching suits;  
yellow roses  
    (dim as candlelight)  
crawl down their arms.

Pearl wears  
a white confection of a gown,  
all frothing tulle.

It matches  
her wintry flowers  
and the streaks of white  
in her otherwise dark hair.

    (Were they there before?

    It's hard to tell.)

And in front of the children  
is Benjamin.

He looks so tall,  
a solid oak tree  
of a boy.

In his suit,  
he could be royalty,  
crowned  
by the shimmering lights.

I want to tell him this,  
but I can't uncage my voice.

Benjamin smiles,

as if I am the only girl in the world,  
sunflower radiant.

*Hello, Ilana.*

**The five of us**

take our seats  
high above the rest of the audience.  
The lights go down;  
the strings hum in the orchestra pit,  
preparing to usher me  
into a story.

In the rising tide of darkness,  
Benjamin takes my hand.  
I hold on to his  
just as tightly.  
He is so *real*,  
so much more  
than a twentieth-century shadow  
casting itself  
over the present.

And I am a princess, loved  
by a prince.  
I am a girl, discovered  
by a wizard.

I am finally  
where I *belong*.

**The music of the opera**

leaves me feeling drunk.  
When the first act ends,  
my head

is full to bursting.  
During intermission,  
I guide Benjamin  
into the opera house's shadows  
and kiss him  
again and again.

I've found sanctuary  
inside a boy,  
a song,  
a city,  
a moment.  
I hope  
Benjamin has found sanctuary  
inside me too.

The houselights flicker,  
signaling that the performance  
will soon begin again.  
Benjamin and I can't stay here,  
cloaked in music  
and time  
we don't have.

But I like to imagine  
we could.

**When the opera is over,**  
and the silence crowds around us,  
Wassermann bows his head.  
His mouth hangs above me,  
a sickle moon  
on the horizon.

*I want you  
to stay in Prague.  
I want you  
to live with us.  
His accent thickens  
with every word.  
I could teach you  
true magic.  
And you could  
play music, now  
and forever.  
I can give you  
the gift that I carry—  
life eternal.*

The question that unfolds  
on my tongue  
is the only one  
that matters.  
*Why me?*

Rudolf Wassermann's smile  
is endless as the sea.  
*Because you're talented.  
Because you see us  
as we are.  
Because Benjamin  
loves you.*

What happens  
to the families of the girls  
who step through enchanted doorways  
and never return?

The books I read when I was little  
never gave an answer.  
But as I've learned,  
just because someone disappears  
doesn't mean  
they're forgotten  
by everyone.  
Grief fills  
the holes in the world  
they leave behind.

*What about my parents?  
My aunt?  
My friends back home?  
What will they think?*

Wassermann shakes his head.  
*They don't need you, Ilana.  
They don't appreciate you.  
But Benjamin,  
the other children,  
and I...  
We want you  
to be part of our family.  
We know  
how very special  
you really are.*

**I walk,**  
stunned,  
into the velvet night.

Benjamin trails after me,  
a falling star

who has finally reached earth.  
*He asked you, didn't he?*  
*Wassermann asked you*  
*to join us.*

*Yes.*  
The word  
rolls off my tongue  
so easily.  
I almost want to run inside  
and offer the same one to Wassermann  
right here and now.  
I'll never be  
what my parents hoped for.  
I'm too much myself.

*Please, don't.*  
Benjamin's voice  
is gentle as twilight.  
But his eyes beg me  
to stop dreaming  
and start listening.

*Ilana, I need*  
*to tell you*  
*the truth.*  
*Wassermann's magic*  
*stopped me*  
*from doing it*  
*so many times before.*  
*But thanks to you,*  
*I remember who I am.*  
*Thanks to you,*

*I'm finally strong enough  
to push back  
against Wassermann.*

**Here is the truth**

my blue-eyed boy imparts  
under the eye of the moon:  
*Wassermann is the monster  
you named  
in the game  
the twins and I played—  
the vodník.*

*He is always hungry, Ilana.  
He's trapped us in Prague.  
And he'll trap you here too.*

***I love you, says Benjamin.***

I've wanted to hear him tell me so  
since we first kissed.  
But not  
    like  
        *this.*

I choke  
on my response.  
Words fill my throat,  
a row of poison apple seeds.  
*I don't understand.*

Benjamin shakes me.  
*I love you  
and that's why*

*I'm telling you this.  
If you stay with us,  
you'll become like Wassermann,  
always starving  
for more,  
willing to do anything  
to get it.*

*Please, Benjamin begs.  
Even if it means  
we have to say goodbye,  
you don't deserve  
Wassermann's fate.  
The world can be cruel,  
I know.  
Don't be cruel  
alongside it.  
Don't become like him—  
like me.*

**I pick up my skirts**  
and flee,  
kicking my bloody shoes aside  
once I reach the river.  
They tumble down the bank;  
the black water accepts  
my heartbreak.  
I'm diving even deeper  
into the tale  
I'm trying to escape from.

But I have to get away.  
I trusted Benjamin;

I trusted Wassermann.  
I trusted that the music  
wouldn't lead me astray.

But I've wandered  
far from the path,  
    the safety  
    offered by an orderly life  
and realized  
I've been  
in the company of monsters  
all this time.

**My aunt's anger**  
lights up the threshold of Rose Cottage.

*We need to talk—*  
four ominous words.  
But for once,  
they don't make  
my heart quake.  
Nothing Aunt Žofie says  
can be worse  
than what I've already heard.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**At this hour,**

my aunt's studio

looks like a witch's lair.

Every paintbrush is a wand;

every canvas a spell book.

I'm bracing for the truth—

but knowing

is better than *not*.

I say:

*Tell me*

*what's really*

*going on.*

Aunt Žofie turns from the shadows.

*I told your father*

*you were playing music again*

*and spending time*

*with the dead boy*

*because I wanted you*

*to give them both up.*

*I'm sorry*

*for betraying you,*

*but both the ghost*

*and the black violin*

*belong to a monster.*

*His name*

*is Rudolf Wassermann,*

I say.

*Have you met him?*

Aunt Žofie shakes her head.  
*I haven't.*  
*But I've heard of him.*  
*The creature's real name*  
*is the vodník,*  
*the river man.*

My heart skips.  
The creature  
in one of her books  
is the reality  
that's been in front of me  
the entire summer.  
***The vodník wasn't born here;***  
*no part of our river*  
*runs through his veins.*  
*He came from Germany.*  
My aunt's look is darker  
than the midnight hour  
closing in on us.  
*My grandmother, Babička, told me*  
*he traps the souls of children*  
*in a teapot.*  
*Without those souls,*  
*he'd become mortal,*  
*doomed to ashes*  
*and dust.*

*Babička warned me:*  
*"To be around the dead*  
*is to call the vodník*  
*from the water."*  
*I only half-believed her.*

*Still, I turned away  
from ghosts and anything else  
that had already given in  
to decay.*

*I see now that I was right.  
I never should have let you  
climb Rose Hill.*

***I still don't understand, I say.***

*If Wassermann is the vodník,  
why does he care about me?*

*I'm not a ghost—*

*I'm alive.*

Even if the boy I love  
isn't  
and never will be  
again.

*Why do you think the thirteenth fairy  
cursed Briar Rose?*

*Why do you think Snow White's stepmother  
asked for her daughter's heart?*

*Aunt Žofie shrugs.*

*Some creatures are empty—*

*they'll do anything*

*to be filled up,*

*even for an instant.*

*For the vodník to show*

*such interest in you,*

*he must believe*

*you can give him*

*whatever it is*

*he needs.*

**Aunt Žofie clasps my hands**

in hers.

*You must stay away  
from the river man, Ilana.*

*I can't lose you.*

*And neither*

*can your parents.*

*They are strict, yes,*

*but I know*

*everything they say and do  
springs from love.*

*Turn away from the magic  
before it's too late.*

*Please.*

I want to promise her

I'll do just that.

But all I can think of  
is Benjamin.

**Maybe sixteen is a curse,**

a time when everyone is stuck  
between being a child  
and being something else.

Maybe that's why  
we find our ghosts then.

Maybe that's why  
monsters like Wassermann  
find *us*.

**Sleep escapes me that night**

and Aunt Žofie refuses to let me leave  
Rose Cottage  
when I finally stumble  
out of bed.

The hours pass,  
syrupy, school-day slow.  
I catch myself  
looking  
over my shoulder,  
waiting  
for the gentle hand  
of a dead boy  
to settle on my skin.

But Benjamin doesn't come for me.

**Dad texts me three times;**

Mom calls me twice.

I ignore them both,

not out of spite

but because I don't know

how to respond.

Their messages feel so distant,

missives

from the other side of the galaxy.

How can I think about the future

when the past

(Wassermann the eternal,

his house of ghosts,

the graveyard he took them from)

won't let me go?

**At dusk,**

I sneak out to the cemetery  
and wait  
beside Benjamin's grave.

It's not long  
before the air around me shivers  
and the blue-eyed boy arrives.  
But for once,  
I don't smile at him.

*I want the full truth, I say.  
I want to know  
everything you know.  
You owe me that much.*

Benjamin draws a breath.  
*You've helped me become stronger  
than I ever was before.  
I can show you now.*  
He doesn't wait  
for my permission to put his  
    (cold)  
hands  
on my face.

My world falls away,  
and is replaced  
by his.



## Chapter Thirty

**In the beginning,**  
there was a boat  
on the Vltava  
    when the war  
        to end all wars  
            had ended  
and a boy  
    named Benjamin  
who fell  
into the river.

The water filled his lungs.  
He believed, then,  
that he was going to die.  
He didn't realize  
the dying would come later.

**The fever brought on**  
by the river water  
came suddenly,  
an invasion  
no one  
had prepared for.

The defenses  
mounted by doctors,  
tears,  
prayers  
failed.  
Benjamin's mother wept  
in Czech.

His father cursed  
in German.

*(The Germans  
have a word  
for everything,  
Benjamin says grimly.)*

His parents begged God  
in Yiddish,  
Hebrew.

His sister bargained  
in the language of silence.  
And Benjamin thrashed  
in his bed,  
August fire  
raging inside him.

*(When a phoenix burns,  
it rises from the ashes.  
But I was a boy,  
not a bird.  
And when I burned,  
there was nothing  
left of me.)*

**When Benjamin's soul**  
left his body,  
he hovered  
near his family,  
a dream,  
unfulfilled.

*I'm fine!* he cried.  
*It doesn't hurt anymore!*



But he  
did not leave.

(Benjamin whispers:  
*I didn't go back  
to my family's house.  
I should have.  
But I was a coward.  
I didn't want to see  
how much pain  
they were in.*)

**It wasn't until Benjamin's parents**  
laid his headstone  
a month later  
that Wassermann  
found him.

(Regret  
darkens  
Benjamin's eyes  
and his roses  
to midnight blue.  
*People believe that you'll recognize  
the monsters in your life  
the first time you meet them.  
They don't realize  
the greatest of monsters  
always appear  
as the best of friends.*)

**The man without a shadow arrived**  
whistling  
and waltzing

around the headstones  
to the music  
in his head.  
He was mad for it, as ever.

*(Wassermann confused me,  
Benjamin says.  
With a song in his mouth  
and sour cherry jam  
on his left hand,  
red as blood,  
I knew he couldn't be a Jew.  
You shouldn't sing  
or eat  
in a cemetery.  
We never want our dead  
to long  
for what they cannot have.)*

***Why, hello there, young man!***

Wassermann said.  
His white leather coat  
billowed outward,  
a stolen piece of winter sky.

Benjamin stared.  
*I...I didn't think  
anyone  
could see me.  
Are you dead too?*

Wassermann shook his head.  
*I'm not dead.  
I'm just different.*

Benjamin had always liked things  
that were different.

*I suppose I'm different too,*  
he said,  
thinking of  
six-toed cats  
and gray cygnets.

**Wassermann wrung**

his hands together,  
as if he were praying  
for the departed Benjamin.  
*It's always a tragedy  
when a child dies  
as young as you are.*

His gaze fell  
on the dead boy's headstone.  
*Tell me, Benjamin,  
why haven't you moved on  
to...wherever?*

*I can't, said Benjamin.  
My sister is here.  
My family is here.  
I can't leave  
until they do.*

Wassermann's eyes glinted  
when he suggested:  
*Why not stay with me  
until it's time to be reunited  
with your family?  
I have a lovely house*

*and like you, it is  
extraordinary.*

Benjamin gasped.  
*You would let me  
stay with you?  
But you just met me!*  
You're alone, said Wassermann.  
So am I.

(And for all his lies,  
I knew  
in that moment  
Wassermann was as lonely  
as a well without water.)

*Will you come with me, Benjamin?  
Will you come home?*

I'm powerless  
to stop the boy I love  
from taking Wassermann's hand  
and walking  
into the night  
alongside him.

(It wasn't until  
I entered the black house  
that I realized  
what I'd done.  
I belonged to him, says Benjamin.  
He held my soul  
then and now  
and for all time.)

## **The boogeyman**

exists in every country.

Aunt Žofie and Benjamin

name him

the *vodník*;

Mom called him

*el Viejo del Saco*—

the sack man,

who stuffed wayward children

into his bag and carried them

far from the light.

The song is the same;

it's only played

in a slightly different key.



## Chapter Thirty-One

**I flick my tears away.**

They feel so pointless;  
I can't make a sword from them,  
or an arrow  
that might crack  
Wassermann's heart  
in two.

Benjamin pulls his knees  
up to his chin.

*The vodník  
stole the dead  
the same way  
every time.*

*He would go to the cemetery  
after a child  
passed away  
and lure us back to his house.*

*Pearl was the last one  
he caught.*

*Strawberry girl, I whisper.*  
As if I can give her  
a name that Wassermann  
doesn't own.

**In 1941,**  
*the Germans smashed  
the cemetery  
with hammers,  
bullets,  
their own strong*

*and hateful fists.*

*I wept  
when I returned  
and saw the broken pieces,  
the granite lions,  
the cracked stone vineyards.  
I couldn't understand  
why they hated us  
so much.*

***Wassermann was furious***  
*about the cemetery.  
His hunting ground was gone.  
But one last child  
was buried here  
before it was destroyed:  
Pearl.  
She starved,  
as so many did  
after the Nazis invaded.*

*And when she awoke here,  
Wassermann was waiting,  
with a truffle  
in his hand.*

*Benjamin swallows.  
Now there's a hole  
where most of Pearl's memories  
should be.  
It won't be long  
before she only remembers  
loving*

*and being loved  
by Wassermann.  
He took everything else  
away from her.*

I can't think of anything worse  
for the strawberry girl.  
The Germans  
stole her life,  
but Wassermann stole  
her childhood.

**The truth of everything**

fills my mouth  
like bile.

*Benjamin!*

*Your memories...*

*Wassermann's eating them,  
isn't he?*

*He's eating your souls.*

Yes, Benjamin murmurs.

*The dead are made of memories—  
when those are gone,  
we disappear.*

*There used to be so many more ghosts  
in the black house.*

*But Wassermann ate us,  
one by one.*

*Now only Pearl and I  
and the twins  
remain.*

Why can't the others

see

(and *feel*)

how threadbare  
they've become,  
how their colors  
are bleeding out,  
how their roses wilt  
a little more  
each day?

I don't need to ask  
my question aloud;  
Benjamin answers it anyway.  
*Lior, Issur, and Pearl*  
*believe Wassermann loves them,*  
*because they love him.*  
*All the children he ate did.*  
*And when you're dead,*  
*what else*  
*is there to love?*

**I fall backward.**

The grass feels too soft  
for this conversation.  
*What can I do?*

*Nothing,* says Benjamin.  
*I only told you*  
*because I wanted you*  
*to know the truth.*

I take his hands.  
*Please, Benjamin.*  
*I can help you!*

*Let me try to find a way.*

Benjamin  
pulls back.

*Go home, Ilana.*

*Go home and forget  
any of this  
ever happened.*

**The light in my aunt's room**

snaps on,

its glow

lullaby soft.

It's tempting

to stop listening to Benjamin,

to creep back inside

and hide from the dark things

ruling Prague.

I could return to the future—

my future.

But here in the cemetery,

it's impossible

not to think about how

the Nazis stole Jews,

the governments of my parents' youths

stole friends, thoughts, ideas,

poems.

I can't let Wassermann

do the same thing.

The children in the black house

can't leave

unless Wassermann lets them go.  
And I don't think  
he ever will.

Not unless  
someone  
*makes* him.

**I say:**

*You told me  
I was a miracle.  
I think you're one too, Benjamin.  
We're strong together.  
We can win  
against Wassermann.*

Benjamin swallows.  
I can see something  
begin to glimmer in his eyes.  
*I know Wassermann  
keeps our souls  
hidden away in his house,  
he says.  
I've looked  
but never found them.  
It's an ancient place  
with too many secrets.*

*My aunt said  
he keeps the souls of the dead  
in a teapot,  
I whisper,  
afraid Wassermann might hear me,  
even from such a great distance.*

*If we find it,  
if we break it,  
you can finally be free!  
Free.*

Benjamin says the word  
as if it's a song  
he's never heard before.

But his freedom  
will have a price.

I'll lose Benjamin  
because I love him,  
because he deserves better  
than being sixteen  
forever.

**I curl myself around the space**

where Benjamin is  
and isn't.

The dewdrops  
caught on the leaves above us  
imitate the stars.

I want to tell Benjamin:

*Hold me,  
because soon  
you won't be able to.*

*Hold me,  
because I'm about to walk  
into the monster's lair  
and I'll need to remember  
something beautiful.*

Somehow,  
he knows exactly  
what I need.  
He folds his arms around me  
and I lean into the cold.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

### **The purple night**

melts into dawn  
and Aunt Žofie tumbles into bed.  
I'll have hours  
before she'll wake and look for me.

I put the key to Rose Cottage  
on a chain around my neck.  
It beats  
against my collarbone  
as I cross Charles Bridge  
and run  
down the lanes  
to where the black house  
sits in Old Town, hunched and twisted  
like a gargoyle.  
I should have left  
Aunt Žofie a note.  
I should have called  
my mother back.

(I should never have come  
in the first place.)

But  
    here  
        I  
            am.

**I knock,**  
more than half-hoping

Wassermann won't answer.

I am both lucky and unlucky.  
He opens the door with a flourish  
and a smile.

*Ilana!*

*How lovely it is  
to see you!*

I remember the girls  
in every Degas painting,  
ballerinas  
made of a man's  
gossamer dreams.  
I try to be like them,  
peeking up  
through my lashes  
at Wassermann, demure  
as a watercolor.

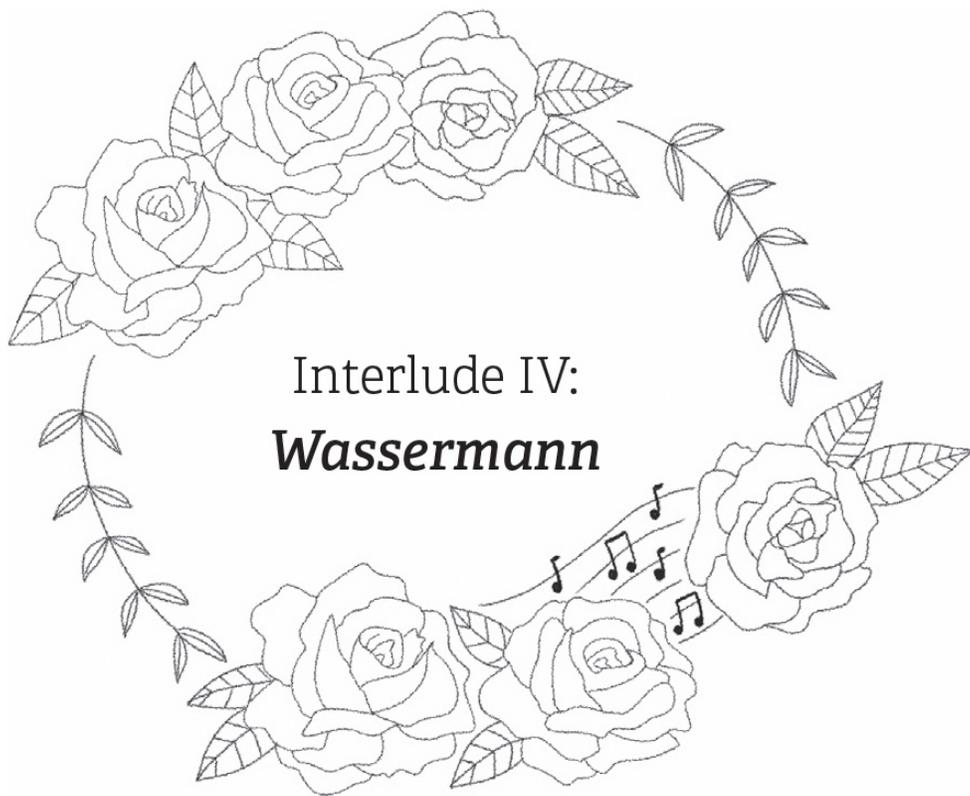
*You were right, I tell him.  
About my aunt  
and mom and dad.  
They don't care about me.  
My parents  
sent me away to change who I am.  
My old friends  
don't even bother to talk to me.  
And Aunt Žofie's too caught up  
in her own life.  
None of them  
understand me.  
But*

*you  
do.*

The lies  
taste like black licorice,  
because some of them  
are almost true.

*I want to be  
around people  
who care,  
people who want me  
to be myself, I say.  
Benjamin's my best friend.*

*I want to stay  
beside him  
always.*



Interlude IV:  
***Wassermann***

**This is my very favorite part—**  
the splendid moment  
when a boy  
or a girl  
comes to me  
of their own free will,  
hearts splintered  
by sorrow,  
souls aching  
for love denied  
or lost.

Centuries of practice  
have made an actor of me.  
I've gotten so *good*

at arranging tears on my face.  
as I listen to the despair  
of a child  
who has realized  
they can never  
go home again.

**But Ilana is different.**

She's more  
than just her sadness.  
The girl lights up  
every room she enters  
in the softest hues  
of pink and gold.  
It blinds me,  
but I can't  
ever  
seem  
to look away.

I have to stop myself  
from licking my lips.

She is going to be mine  
mine  
*mine.*



## Chapter Thirty-Three

**Wassermann escorts me**

to another café.

I'm not allowed

into the black house.

I haven't signed

my soul away.

(Yet.)

He orders us chocolate cake,

thick slabs of gingerbread,

*palačinky* dripping

with vanilla cream sauce

on frosted glass plates.

I don't want to take anything

Wassermann gives me,

but I'm too hungry

not to.

**In the gloom of the café**

Wassermann folds himself up

like a letter tucked away

inside an envelope.

He tells me:

*I came from Bavaria,*

*where they ate their fairy tales.*

*There was no monster*

*who could not be turned*

*into the first course*

*at dinner,*

*no extraordinary beast*

*whose head did not wind up  
on a wall.*

*They wore necklaces of harpy talons  
beneath their finely pressed suits.  
They bottled the voice of the west wind,  
adding it to their morning tea.*

*The Bavarians tried to empty  
the world of wonder—  
myself included.  
But they failed.*

***The man with no shadow***  
breaks off a piece of gingerbread,  
sucking on a corner,  
needy.  
I see my own hunger  
    reflected  
back at me.  
I flex my fingers, wishing  
I had something to hold—  
a violin bow,  
a paintbrush,  
the hilt of a sword.  
Anything  
that would stop me  
from feeling  
so powerless.

But the only power  
I have  
is in my lies.

*I'm sorry you're in exile, I say.  
My family is just a chain  
of people who can't  
go home again either.*

Wassermann crushes his hand on top of mine  
in a parody of love.

(It's very hard  
not to scream.)

*It's as if  
I were always  
meant to find you!  
You're a clever girl, Ilana.  
I do so appreciate cleverness.  
There's never been  
a living girl  
in my house.  
But I'm sure  
it will be good  
for all of us.  
Meet me tomorrow  
on Charles Bridge  
and I'll take you  
to your new home.*

**If I stayed with him**

long enough,  
would I force myself to become friends  
with Wassermann  
in order to survive?

Would I laugh at his jokes  
and accept the way

he tweaks the tail of my braid?  
Would I play  
the black violin  
for him  
    (and only him)  
until my fingers bled?  
Would I call him  
*Uncle, Strýc, Onkel?*  
There are so many words  
for what he could be.  
I hope  
not to learn any of them.

**I am back in bed**  
before Aunt Žofie wakes.  
She checks on me when she does,  
and I force my breath  
to slow,  
mezzo piano.

My aunt would stop me  
if she knew  
what I was planning.

If you love a person,  
you never let them venture  
into the dark alone.

**To rescue the dead, I need:**  
more salt than I can hold  
in my hands,  
more Psalms than I can carry  
on my tongue,  
more courage than I can lock

in my bones.

What I have:

my own (trembling) heart,

a ghost,

and a black violin.

I remind myself:

my mother's name means *wolf*.

I remind myself:

my family always survives

the ones who hunt them.

I remind myself:

Prague is as much

my city

as it is Wassermann's now.



Fourth Movement:  
***The Final Girl***

## Chapter Thirty-Four

**In the movies,**  
only one girl is allowed  
to survive the monster.

There's something fascinating  
about that final girl,  
the one who leaves  
the haunted house,  
the basement,  
the cabin in the woods  
when all the others  
are gone.

They say the final girl  
is the last one standing  
because she's pure.  
But they're wrong.

The final girl survives  
because she can be  
just as ruthless  
as the monster  
who wants  
to destroy her.

**Mom once told me,**  
if anyone ever tried to snatch me,  
I had to fight them  
with everything I had.

She pulled my hair back  
into a ponytail,

like she was already  
preparing me for battle.

*Your legs  
are stronger than  
your fists.*

*Yell “Fire!”*

*It’s how someone will know  
you’re in danger,  
because we live  
in a world  
where “Help!”  
is ignored.*

I don’t think  
she ever believed  
I’d *let* myself  
be kidnapped by a beast—  
man-shaped  
or otherwise.

But that’s exactly  
what I’m going to do.

**On the morning of my departure,**

I take the black violin  
and little else.

Nothing Aunt Žofie owns  
can help me now.

I lock the door to Rose Cottage  
for what might be  
the last time  
and walk down the old road.

My footsteps are as silent

as secrets.

I don't look back.

**Wassermann meets me**

on Charles Bridge,  
as promised.

No one is here  
but us.

For the first time,  
I miss the clouds of tourists,  
their parasols and cameras  
held high.

The puddle  
around Wassermann's shoes  
is bigger  
and deeper  
than I've ever seen it.  
He must have been here a long time,  
waiting for me.

(I'm glad  
I made him wait.)

**Wassermann's expression**

rises and falls.

*I was afraid  
you weren't coming!*

*I told you I'd be here.*  
I try for a smile,  
hoisting the violin case  
in the air.

I should give it back to Wassermann,  
but I'm not willing to part  
with the beautiful  
    (horrible)  
thing inside  
    just yet.

Wassermann's blind eye  
roams across the bridge.  
He must be more nervous  
than I am.  
When a wish comes true,  
it never feels  
quite  
real.  
And he must have wished  
very hard  
for me.

(Or does  
    some part of him know  
    he's about to invite  
    a girl-wolf  
    into his belly?)

*Come along,*  
Wassermann says.  
*You have a busy lifetime*  
*ahead of you.*

**I follow the man with no shadow,**  
the violin case bumping  
against my knees,  
bruising them purple

as the fading night.

Where I'm going,  
I won't ever grow up.  
But Wassermann  
isn't taking me to Neverland  
or Narnia.

**We pass the stolen headstones**  
in Old Town.

They form a black chessboard  
and even Wassermann  
avoids  
walking on them.  
He hops over every crack  
like a child himself.

We reach the black house  
as dawn sweeps over Prague.  
It would be so easy to run;  
Aunt Žofie wouldn't even know  
I'd been gone.

Wassermann frowns  
at my wavering steps.  
He opens the door,  
sweeping a hand  
(no claws to be seen)  
inside.

*Aren't you coming, Ilana?*

I'm the girl,  
not the monster;  
he shouldn't have to  
invite me into his home.

But he does.

I fit another smile  
onto my lips,  
like I'm putting on  
a new coat,  
one with knives hidden  
in its pockets,  
and walk  
    across  
        the threshold.

I'm a comet tail of a girl,  
hurtling toward  
the dark center of something  
I don't understand.

**Stop me**  
if you've heard this one before:  
a musician  
descends  
into the underworld.

(But the story  
doesn't have to end there.)



## Chapter Thirty-Five

### **I wade into the black house**

the way I used to wade  
into the ocean.

Every step I take  
feels too slow.

But Wassermann  
moves briskly,  
whistling  
as he guides me deeper  
into his kingdom.  
He got what he wanted—  
or what he thought he did.

There's a difference, you know.

### **In the foyer, there are:**

four pairs of children's shoes,  
and a basket of others,  
single sandals and boots  
without owners.

How many  
other children were here  
before Benjamin,  
Issur and Lior,  
Pearl?  
It's a thought  
I won't let myself follow  
to its end.

### **The bone structure of Wassermann's house**

is too good.  
I can see the way one floorboard  
fits into the joint of the next.  
Like its owner,  
the house  
must be  
starving.

The wallpaper is absinthe green  
and I swear  
I can see faces in the water stains,  
open mouths,  
weeping eyes,  
hands forever clawing  
for solid ground.

### **The bedroom**

Wassermann takes me to  
is a nursery.  
Toys from every era  
are piled in the corners;  
half-finished books  
lie on the floor.  
There are a dozen beds  
but only four look slept in,  
their sheets rumpled  
and warm.

### **Whispers travel to the ceiling**

like smoke from the cigarette  
Wassermann lights  
with his finger.

Pearl, Lior, and Issur

stare at me  
from where they're sitting  
on the floor.  
They don't know  
I've come to free them.  
The twins swarm me first.  
*Ilana! Ilana!*  
*You're here to stay!*  
*Will you play us more music?*

They are all smiles,  
but for an instant,  
their bright eyes  
fall on Wassermann  
and something within them  
folds,  
diminishes.

There's only  
one person here  
who's allowed to take up space.

**Pearl is less trusting**  
than the boys.  
Her dying roses flare  
a momentary jealous crimson  
when Wassermann  
skims his fingers  
along my collarbone.

I can *feel*  
how his breath  
knots in his throat.  
He must love

how much Pearl  
loves *him*  
in this moment.

*There's no need  
to be jealous, Pearl.  
Ilana will be  
your big sister!*  
Wassermann smiles.  
*Won't you like that?*

*No!*  
Pearl stuffs her thumb into  
her pink mouth.

(I can't fault her  
for her jealousy.  
If you must live  
with a monster,  
it's safer  
to be adored by him  
above all others.)

**I put the violin case**  
on an empty bed,  
and take out the clothing  
I've wrapped  
Wassermann's instrument in.  
I lay a dress on the white sheets,  
and see the monster  
nod his approval.  
A girl who intends to run  
doesn't bring  
a wardrobe with her.

(But a girl  
who intends to fight  
does.)

**I feel fingers**

brush  
against my shoulder.  
Their touch  
is warm, solid,  
*real.*

I twirl  
and see Benjamin  
without the haze of death  
casting a veil  
over the sharpness of his features.  
His eyes are so blue;  
they're like a shot  
to my heart.

In the black house,  
more than anywhere,  
he and I  
are made of endings.  
And that's why  
I need to kiss him—  
so we can have a beginning too.

I close my eyes,  
press my lips  
against his gently,  
like neither of us  
weighs more  
than a snowflake.

(I was born in 2006.  
He was born in 1902.  
We've both been  
time traveling  
so we could meet  
in the here and now.)

**A whistle cuts us short.**

It's tuneless,  
but sharp enough to make me  
bleed.

Benjamin and I  
turn  
as one  
and Wassermann winks  
at us, as if he  
and he alone  
were privy to our kiss,  
as if the others  
weren't there  
at all.

*Now, now,  
meine Kinder.  
Ilana will have plenty of time  
for all of you later.  
First, she and I  
need to talk.*

I don't want  
to be alone  
with Wassermann  
ever

again.

But I have  
no choice.



## Chapter Thirty-Six

### **Wassermann's office**

is so mundane  
that it makes me dizzy.

The room is all cherrywood  
and softly glowing lamps.  
Walls of books  
on poetry,  
astronomy,  
history  
press in on us,  
making the space feel  
like a set of lungs  
contracting.

Wassermann throws himself  
into the armchair  
behind his shipwreck of a desk.  
There's so much jetsam  
splashed across it,  
I don't know where to begin  
looking for the teapot  
he keeps  
the souls of the dead inside.  
But it must be here  
*somewhere.*

Wassermann opens a book at random,  
the pages rippling  
like waves.  
*As the only living child here,*

*you'll have special responsibilities,*  
he declares,  
like a father—  
or a general.  
*But I imagine*  
*you'll love*  
*being an older sister.*  
*Being an only child*  
*is so lonely.*  
*I should know—*  
*I was one*  
*myself.*

My smile  
is vanilla sweet.  
*I won't have to be lonely now.*  
*It's like in Peter Pan.*  
*I'm Wendy Darling.*

Shadows collect  
in the fine lines  
around Wassermann's mouth,  
but none dare  
touch him.  
They, too,  
must be wary of his appetite.  
*I'm afraid I haven't*  
*read that book.*

**I'm made up of even older tales**  
than Wassermann can imagine.  
My People  
left Egypt,

traveled to the land  
of milk and honey,  
were banished  
to the wilds  
of Babylon,  
Germany,  
Poland  
a thousand years  
before the Grimms  
set their stories  
down on paper.

My People's tale  
is old as time.  
And it is *strong*.

**Wassermann spreads**  
his January-white hands  
on either side of my face, smiling.

*Soon, I will take your death  
and hide it  
inside a needle,  
an egg,  
a duck,  
a rabbit,  
guarded by a wolf  
on an island  
far from here.*

*You will never sleep  
inside a glass coffin;  
your bones will never crumble  
like sugar cubes.*

*You  
and I  
will live  
until this world ends  
and another  
opens its pages.*

I am sixteen,  
but I want  
to be eighteen,  
thirty-six,  
ninety-six,  
and counting.  
I want to see everything  
this world  
    (and the next)  
have to offer.

But what falls from my lips  
is another lie.  
*Good.*  
*I never want to get old.*

Wassermann rubs at his  
(dead)  
(white)  
eye.  
His fingers  
come away,  
damp with liquid  
thicker  
than tears.  
Is there blood in his veins

or does he carry a river  
with him, always?  
*You don't have to worry, Ilana.*  
*You'll never have to grow up now.*

(It's a promise  
I know  
Wassermann will keep  
if I'm not careful.)

**In a house full of children,**  
there are always  
bangs,  
clatters,  
shrieks of delight  
and dismay.  
Just because  
the kids here are dead  
doesn't make them  
an exception.

So when one of the twins  
screams,  
Wassermann sighs.  
He does such a good impression  
of the put-upon uncle  
that a corner of my heart  
almost falls  
for the act.  
*I'll be back*  
*in a moment,* he says.  
The darkness itself  
writhes around Wassermann

as he passes me.

**I race**

to the other side of the desk,  
opening each drawer  
as slowly  
as my shaking fingers  
will let me.

I need to find the teapot.  
But what excuse  
could I give Wassermann  
if he catches me now?  
I've run out of lies;  
I've used them all up  
getting this far.

**What I discover**

in the monster's desk:  
coins from dead empires;  
a bestiary,  
many-legged monsters marked  
as *sister*,  
as *brother*.  
But there's no teapot  
to be seen.  
Outside, I hear  
the man with no shadow  
lecturing Lior and Issur,  
his voice droning  
on  
and on.

I'm about to return

to my seat  
when my eyes settle  
on the book  
Wassermann's been poring over.

This must be  
how Pandora felt  
when she was confronted  
with the box of her undoing.

I reach for it anyway.

**On the first page**

is a sketch:  
a hollow-eyed girl.  
I don't recognize her,  
but I know the hand  
that drew her.  
It is unmistakably Benjamin's.  
The second drawing  
is of a boy,  
his face gaunt,  
a famine victim  
in his final days.  
As I meet the boy's longing gaze,  
I start to understand.

Each page in the book  
contains another drawing  
of another  
*dead*  
child,  
eaten  
one memory

at a time  
by Rudolf Wassermann.

The pages go on  
and on.  
Five children,  
ten,  
twelve—  
soon, I lose count  
the way I did  
when I tried to read  
the names of the dead  
on the walls of Pinkas Synagogue.  
The numbers  
overwhelm me.  
And so do  
the eyes.

**I'm staring**  
at the death rattle of a soul,  
catalogued,  
a collection of souvenirs  
grimmer than any bag of bones.

These drawings are Benjamin's  
memorial to the children  
                  swallowed  
by Wassermann.  
But I believe  
our monster  
keeps the sketches  
for a far different reason:  
he is gloating

over his stolen eternity.

Anger that goes past red  
and into the black  
floods my head,  
a dam broken  
into a thousand  
    jagged  
        pieces.

Each pair of shoes  
in the foyer  
was worn by a child  
Wassermann took from the cemetery.  
I know their faces now,  
but they are lost  
to me  
and every world.



## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### **The squeak of wet shoes**

warns me of Wassermann's approach.  
I turn the book  
back to its awful beginning.

If I kill Wassermann,  
isn't that the same  
as destroying  
whatever holds  
the souls of Benjamin and the others?

Won't his death  
also set the children free?

### **Benjamin knows my heart**

has a new crack in it  
the instant  
I stumble  
out of Wassermann's office.

*Is there a place  
we can be alone?*  
I try to sound  
like a girl  
who wants a kiss  
and nothing more.

Benjamin excels  
at the game of survival.  
The roses braided around his wrist  
turn red with love and need.  
But his eyes

remain unclouded.

He guides me  
down the corridor,  
tracing his finger  
along the walls as we go.  
A door that was not there before  
creaks open beside us,  
a (temporary)  
sanctuary.  
The space  
we slip into is small;  
it presses our ribs together.  
I am Eve;  
he is Adam.  
We spring from each other  
and the feeling of Benjamin's cheek  
against mine  
is like coming home.

***The shoes with no owners, I manage.***

*All those kids.*

I didn't understand  
before now.  
I didn't understand  
how many ghosts  
Wassermann has eaten.

I double over,  
grabbing  
a fistful of Benjamin's shirt.  
I pour  
my screams into cloth

a century old.

My hands  
feel weaker than they ever did  
in the cemetery.  
Why did I think  
I could do this?

*Tell me about  
the lost world, I beg.  
Tell me a memory  
Wassermann hasn't torn out of you.  
Give me an anchor  
so he can't pull me  
out to sea.*

***My little sister's name was Helena.***  
*And I'm glad she sailed  
across the ocean  
before the war began, Benjamin says.  
Helena might have become  
an actress,  
a fashion designer,  
a doctor,  
as my father  
intended me to be.  
Helena isn't  
sixteen forever.  
Helena got to choose.*

*Forever  
isn't supposed to be  
an ugly word.  
But here,*

it is.

**There are no prayers to carry us back**  
into this tomb of a house,  
no Psalms  
that can scrub my face  
free of salt  
and rage.

But Benjamin and I  
have to go back.  
We need to keep pretending.

The music coming from the office  
buries itself  
like a needle  
    (like a fever)  
in me  
as we enter Wassermann's domain  
    (again)  
but this time,  
Benjamin and I  
go together.

    (We've always been stronger  
        when we're together.)

**Wassermann and I sit**  
side by side  
as Benjamin draws us.

The monster  
smooths his hair,  
tilts his head to the side,

raises his chin high  
so that the curve of his jaw  
is blade sharp.  
He's practiced this pose  
in front of his reflection—  
I can tell.

No living creature  
    (other than me)  
will ever see this portrait,  
but Benjamin  
still makes it flattering,  
smoothing away  
Wassermann's faults  
until he looks  
like a hero  
who recently stepped from  
the stanzas of a poem.

In this moment,  
Benjamin is nothing more  
than Wassermann's magic mirror.

**My gaze skitters**  
to a letter opener  
on the desk.

The blade is as dull  
as unrequited love.  
But my hand begins  
edging  
toward it nonetheless.

I've never hurt anyone.

I've never done battle  
in an alleyway  
or on a playground.  
But I can almost feel  
the weight of the blade  
in my palm.

The little knife  
would fit so perfectly  
in Wassermann's  
swan-white neck.

My fingers  
close  
around  
the hilt of the letter opener  
when—  
*Snap.*  
Benjamin's pencil lies  
broken on the page.  
Black swirls of graphite  
leave scars  
along the softness of his palm.

His eyes say  
what he can't  
as Wassermann pins him  
(a butterfly to a corkboard)  
with a glare  
that paralyzes us both.

In Benjamin's silence, I hear:  
*You're not fast enough  
to kill him.*

*Not  
like  
this.*

He's right—  
I'd fail,  
an Orpheus in every way,  
careless in my haste,  
my desperation to feel the sun  
on my face again.  
But what I wouldn't do  
to strip Rudolf Wassermann  
of everything.

**My life**

lies in two parts now:  
before  
    Benjamin, Wassermann,  
    the cemetery  
    that revealed them both  
and after  
    the kisses,  
    the violin,  
    the truth.

I waver in the haze of *after*  
while Benjamin  
finishes drawing  
his portrait.

There are faces in the walls.  
I try  
not to look.  
I try

not to see  
how much they resemble  
the dead kids  
in Wassermann's book.



## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### **Dad once told me**

there are two theories  
about the size of the universe.

Some scientists say  
it's getting smaller—  
a bubble about to pop.  
The other theory says  
it's expanding—  
a library  
that won't stop adding stories  
to its shelves.

My universe  
is shrinking  
inside the black house;  
there are only  
so many rooms  
I can wander through  
    (always looking for souls)  
and Wassermann's views  
are as narrow  
as his hallways.  
One idea  
could bring  
the entire thing  
down.

### **There is a window**

at the end of the hall  
looking out

across a darkened square.

If I peer through it,  
I could almost  
be back in Prague.  
I glimpse spires  
cutting through the mist  
and hear the toll of far-off bells.

But there's no one outside  
and the sky  
is empty.  
There's no second star  
I can use  
as true north.  
And when I try to open the window,  
the latch sticks.

*What are you doing?*  
Wassermann's voice  
forces me to step back.  
I turn,  
assembling  
another smile for his benefit.  
*I just wanted*  
*a taste of the night air.*

*You can't be*  
*homesick already!*  
Wassermann  
folds his hands  
over mine, as if to keep me  
from flying away  
like a true Wendy-bird.

*What is out in the world  
that you can't find here?*

*We  
are  
all  
you  
need.*

I don't shiver.

If Wassermann  
is a river,  
I'm a stone;  
I won't be moved  
by his power.

**Supper at Aunt Žofie's**  
meant cucumbers so green  
they looked like  
the first day of spring,  
fever-red tomatoes,  
*kulajda* soup with sprigs of dill,  
and fat pierogi  
stuffed with potatoes.  
She was careful  
not to mix meat  
and dairy  
or give me pig.

But I don't think  
I can expect that  
from Wassermann.

The twins lead me

down the hall to the dining room  
later that night—  
or day.

(Who can tell?  
There's no sunlight here,  
no way for me to know  
how much time has passed  
in Wassermann's kingdom.)

The boys hold hands,  
as if they're afraid  
of tumbling  
over the edge of the known world  
without each other.

I can't help but say:  
*I didn't think  
you needed to eat.*  
I'm too close  
to their deaths again,  
but the twins  
don't seem to care.  
They shrug as one.  
I don't think Lior  
and Issur  
plan to do everything  
in unison.  
But they've been  
beside each other for so long  
that their hearts  
and thoughts  
are braided together

like their fingers.

*I like dinner, says Issur.*

*It's almost*

*like being alive again.*

**Who were you,**

I ask,

*when you were alive?*

*The rabbi's grandsons.*

Lior's voice

warms with pride.

*We were going to be rabbis too—*

*studying Torah,*

*Talmud,*

*learning to speak with angels.*

*What was*

*your grandfather's name?*

At this question,

Issur and Lior exchange

a look,

pale brows crinkling

like sheets of paper.

Then Issur says:

*You know,*

*we don't remember*

*anymore.*

**Pomegranates and apples,**

seeded things

intent on trapping me

in this labyrinth,  
are laid out on a long dusty table.  
Each piece of fruit  
looks made of still water  
from Wassermann's river.

He clears his throat,  
his straight-backed posture  
conveying  
a series of commands:  
no elbows on the table,  
knees together,  
ankles crossed,  
now let us pray.

**The dead kids say:**

*Baruch ata Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,  
bo're p'ri ha'etz.*

In this garden of unearthly delights,  
I can't trust anything.  
But I have to wipe  
the drool  
off my chin.

What  
has Wassermann  
done  
to  
me?

***I know you must be confused.***

Wassermann rolls an apple

the color of tears  
across his open palm.  
*When real food  
has rotted away,  
this is what's left.  
A memory of desire,  
slightly fainter  
than the real thing—  
much like a ghost itself.*

He winks at me,  
like this is a wonder,  
not a horror.  
He's long past the point  
where he can  
tell the difference.

*I'm alive, I try.  
I'm human.  
I can't live on the shadows  
of what used to be  
like the dead can.*

Wassermann's breath  
is dragon-fire hot  
against my cheek.  
*Oh, but you can.  
There's a trick to it—  
an art form.  
I promised  
I'd teach you everything.  
Be patient!  
I will.*

**The twins each take an apple**

and sink their teeth  
into its crystal skin.  
The inside of the fruit  
is phantom white.  
Does it have *any* taste?  
Can a memory  
hold on to that much?

I watch the dead eat,  
my own belly  
twisting in hunger.

Wassermann's eyes  
are half-lidded,  
but I don't think  
for a second  
that he isn't drinking up  
my expression  
with his wine.

Is he looking  
for an excuse to transform me  
into just another sketch in the book  
bound in Benjamin's tears?

I keep my face  
as tranquil  
as Ophelia's must have been  
when she lay back  
and let the water  
take her.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

### **It's Pearl**

who Wassermann lures  
away from the table  
and into the office.  
He takes her hand;  
she beams at him,  
the favorite once more.  
But it is I  
who am his  
(un)willing  
accomplice.

When the door is locked,  
Wassermann forces me  
into a chair.  
His hands  
feel sharp as swords  
when they come down  
on my shoulders.  
*I'll teach you  
a new trick now.  
It's really not so difficult.*

Protest surges  
up my throat,  
but it's too late for me  
to pull away.  
Wassermann pries my mouth open  
using two fingers.

Then

it  
begins.

### **The taste of Pearl**

reminds me  
of burnt caramel.  
It sticks  
to the roof of my mouth,  
sealing my lips  
shut,  
keeping my screams  
locked up tight.

I gag  
on life,  
on potential,  
on years  
the little girl  
never got to live.

I want to vomit,  
but the only thing  
filling my stomach is a memory.

### **Home means**

*(meant)*

so many things to Pearl.  
An apartment  
with peeling tea-colored wallpaper,  
a cloud-soft rabbit toy  
tucked into bed beside her,  
the taste of hot cocoa on a winter's day.  
But most of all, it meant  
the June warmth of being held

by a woman  
who smelled of fresh, sweet bread.

The woman  
(her mother)

twirls  
Pearl around their living room,  
an aria of laughter  
accompanying their dance.  
They are two ballerinas in a music box,  
trapped in a moment  
that ended long ago.

But *in* this moment,  
Pearl knows  
    she is safe,  
    she is loved.  
And she believes these things  
    will be true  
    for all time.

**I lift my head—**  
and wish  
I hadn't.  
Pearl's edges are worn,  
ripped,  
*shredded*  
in all  
the wrong places.

    She's a pastel girl now,  
smudged,  
incomplete,  
less real

than even ordinary ghosts.  
I can see her ribs  
peeking out  
from under her skin.

Pearl doesn't have long  
left in this world.  
or any other.

***You can go.***

Wassermann dismisses Pearl  
with a wave of his hand,  
a conductor  
who has tired  
of his instrument.

The little girl  
drifts from the room,  
silent,  
exhausted,  
more confused  
than ever.

Benjamin was right.  
She doesn't understand  
what Wassermann takes from her.

She won't understand  
until it's too late.

**Wassermann pulls me to my feet**  
effortlessly.

I feel light in his arms,  
my bones as hollow

as a raven's.

The man with no shadow  
strokes my hair,  
gentle as the lovers  
he'll make sure  
I never have.

*Not to worry, Ilana.  
It's a bit much at first.  
But you'll get used to it.  
You'll have forever  
to adjust, after all.*

I want  
to howl,  
to wail.  
But no sound  
rises in my throat.

*Go and get the violin,  
will you? Wassermann says.  
I'd like to hear some music  
now that we've eaten.*

### **My People**

have always been forced to entertain  
our demons,  
buying another hour,  
another day,  
another precious  
few  
breaths.

So I play

rage  
and ruination.

I play  
to bring the walls  
of the black house  
down.



## Chapter Forty

### **Benjamin finds me**

after my twisted concert.

I can't look at him.

Not after what Wassermann  
made me do.

Not when I can still  
taste Pearl  
in my mouth.

(I couldn't look at *her*, either,  
when I returned the black violin  
to its case in the nursery.)

Benjamin takes me back  
to the closet he made,  
holding me  
even as I struggle  
against him.

I say:

*I'm going to kill Wassermann.*

*I'm going to get the teapot  
and break him with it.*

*I'm so sorry, Benjamin.*

*I'm so sorry  
this has been happening  
to all of you  
for so long.*

He threads his fingers  
through my hair.

*I'll distract Wassermann.  
I'll take him to another part  
of the house.  
I'll say I need better lighting  
to draw him by.  
Then you can find  
where he's keeping  
our souls.  
Then—*

**Our plan collapses**  
the way I wish  
this house would.  
It ends  
with a short cry  
and Pearl's fawn-light footsteps  
as she runs  
from our hiding spot.

**When we're about to die,**  
we're supposed to say  
the Shema.  
*(Sh'ma Yisra'eil,  
Adonai Eloheinu,  
Adonai echad.)*  
As the door of Wassermann's office  
bangs  
open  
and he approaches,  
I wonder if  
I should say it now.  
  
I've never felt more

like my ancestors,  
hiding in a closet  
with so much fire  
burning in my heart  
I'm afraid  
the light  
will give me away.

**The closet door opens**  
to Wassermann and Pearl  
framed  
by lamplight.

Pearl tugs  
on the sleeve of Wassermann's jacket.  
The fabric goes  
up and down,  
like the cord  
of a bell  
that rings out  
only one message:  
*Found you,  
found you,  
found you.*

*I told you, says Pearl.  
I told you  
they were being bad,  
Onkel Wassermann.  
I told you  
they were planning  
to take me  
away from you.*

Wassermann  
rolls his sleeves up  
with two elegant flicks of his wrist.  
When he speaks,  
his voice  
is terribly quiet.  
*Pearl, will you wait  
in the nursery  
with the twins?*

**Benjamin slides in front of me,**  
his chin already arched  
to take the blow  
he believes  
(or *knows*)  
is coming.

*Stop!*  
My voice  
is the loudest thing  
the room has heard  
since Benjamin and I  
drew up our plan in whispers.  
I push Benjamin aside,  
rougher than I want to be.

*It was my idea.  
Benjamin is too good  
to think of betraying you  
on his own.  
You should know that, Wassermann.  
I'm more like you  
than he's ever been.*

I show my girl-wolf teeth  
in anger, not fear,  
and Wassermann  
stops  
like a watch  
that has run  
out of time.

Benjamin stands up  
beside me,  
ready to deny  
what I've said.  
But we all know  
my words  
hold too much truth.

Wassermann snarls  
and grabs me  
by the end of my braid,  
hauling me  
out of the closet,  
away from the boy  
who can't save me.

**My hair parts**  
from my scalp  
and I feel  
more like Samson  
than Delilah,  
my courage crumbling.

Wassermann drags me  
down the hall,  
my feet kicking uselessly

against the floorboards.

I hear Benjamin  
cry out  
behind us.  
But it's too late.  
It always was.

I'm drowning  
in the legends of my father's city  
and I don't know how to swim  
back to the surface.



## Chapter Forty-One

**I should be angry at Pearl,**  
but I can't help  
feeling sorry for her.

It's not her fault  
the world  
broke her  
and that Wassermann  
was the one  
who glued all her pieces  
back together.

**The little ghost**  
must have left the office door open  
when she came to sell us out;  
Wassermann pushes me  
easily inside.  
He locks the door  
against Benjamin  
    and anyone else  
    who might try to rescue me  
before flinging me  
into the nearest chair.  
    My hip  
smashes  
against the armrest,  
but that's not important.  
    Because when I glance  
at Wassermann's desk,  
I finally see the teapot  
I've been searching for,

resting on a tower of books.

I don't think anything  
can be that full of light  
without holding souls.

I have to be calm.

If I am quick,

if I am clever,

I can get the teapot  
and change  
*everything.*

**Wassermann circles me,**

his eyes  
growing darker,  
his teeth  
lengthening  
by the second.

I picture his heart  
covered in blisters  
and black mold.

I'll never reach a heart like that,  
no matter what I say.

*I*

*let*

*you*

*into*

*my*

*HOUSE!*

*And this*

*is how*

*you repay*

*ME!*

Each of Wassermann's  
words  
fall  
like the blows  
his fists  
must be itching  
to deliver.

I point at the door,  
toward the nursery.  
*You can't keep those kids here!*  
*You can't break off*  
*little pieces of their souls*  
*and stuff them into your mouth*  
*like cookies.*  
*Why can't you*  
*let them go?*

*I give them*  
*a home*  
*and they pay me*  
*in kind!*  
Wassermann's screams  
make the walls shake.  
*They're nothing anyway—*  
*there are hundreds, thousands*  
*of children just like them!*  
*I'm one of the few real fairy tales*  
*left in the world.*  
*I deserve to keep living.*  
*I matter*

*and  
they  
don't!*

Wassermann's hateful words  
are too much for me.

I have  
to act  
*now.*

**I lunge like an arrow**  
loosed from a bow,  
like a wolf set free  
in the forest,  
and grab the teapot  
off Wassermann's desk.

The air whistles  
as he tries to seize my hair  
a second time.  
But Benjamin was wrong—  
I am quicker  
than Wassermann is.  
I shout:  
*You're never  
going to hurt  
anyone  
again!*

The teapot  
feels better than a knife  
in the burning spread of my hand  
as I hurl it  
against the wall

with all my might.

Let there be light,  
let there be life,  
let there be an end  
to all this.

**The shards of the teapot fall,**  
but nothing inside of them  
stirs.

As they rain down,  
Wassermann bursts out  
laughing,  
holding his sides  
like he's about to come undone.  
*Ilana, Ilana, Ilana,*  
he chants, like a spell.  
*Did you really think*  
*I would be stupid enough*  
*to keep the souls of my children*  
*in plain sight?*  
*Did you really think*  
*you could free them as easily as that?*  
*Do you think others*  
*haven't tried?*

Shock leeches  
my swiftness,  
my hope,  
as a new realization  
pins me down.

I'm Persephone,  
trapped in the darkness

with no means  
to claw my way back  
to anyone  
I love.

**Wassermann tips my chin up**  
and kisses me.

The kiss is brutal,  
hurricane furious;  
there's no love  
in the act—  
or in Wassermann himself.  
But the monster takes more  
than my mouth  
in his.

I feel myself  
falling  
away  
the closer  
he gets.

I remember:  
the first time I held a violin.  
I was six years old,  
and the notes  
came as easily as breath.

I feel the memory,  
the piece of me,  
vanish, torn free,  
a scratched-out poem  
from my book of life.

I feel the hole  
it leaves behind,  
empty, bloody, sore—  
as if I've lost a tooth.  
*If you won't work with me,  
then you will work for me,* hisses Wassermann.  
*Your life is as good  
as any other's.*  
*And it certainly  
will nourish me.*

**I can see it clearly now:**  
if Wassermann can't have me,  
he'll destroy me.  
That's what weak people *do*.

And the most impressive monsters  
are always the least impressive men.



## Chapter Forty-Two

**Once, the city of Prague**  
rose up against the Nazis,  
a chorus of resistance.

When Benjamin  
crashes into the office,  
a tempest of a boy,  
his arrival is as loud  
as that artillery fire.  
The bones  
in my wrist  
grind against his  
as he pulls me back  
from Wassermann.  
Together,  
we topple  
into the corridor.

The faces  
in the wood  
blur together.  
There is anger  
in the echoes of suffering  
that reverberate  
through this house.

Benjamin yells:  
*This is our home too,*  
*Wassermann!*

The office door swings shut.

Its edges break down,  
as if they were made of sand,  
leaving nothing  
but smooth wood paneling  
in its place.

**We're not safe;**

we're not free.

The lock Benjamin made

won't hold for long.

The walls are already

rattling in time

with Wassermann's screams.

*Benjamin—*

this might be the last time

I ever get to say his name.

I want to savor it,

but there's no time *left*.

He grips my arms

and I see a flash of the man

he could have been.

He would have fought

with fists or poetry

against the dark tide

that swept over Prague

decades after

he was laid to rest.

(He shouldn't have died  
so young.

Prague needed Benjamin  
and so did our People.)

***You need to go,***  
Benjamin says.  
*You need to run.*

*What about you?*

Benjamin shakes his head  
slowly,  
as if it's heavy  
with all the lives  
he could have lived.  
*It's too late for me,*  
*for any of us.*  
*But it's not too late*  
*for you.*  
*Please, Ilana.*  
*Go home.*  
*Live.*  
*Do it for me.*

**The office door begins taking shape again.**

A knob grows from the wall,  
a black flower  
I can't uproot.

Then the door  
comes  
crashing  
open.  
Wassermann's humanity  
has slipped away  
entirely.  
He lurches  
into the hallway,

hair plastered  
to his brow with sweat.  
His eyes are voids  
even the centuries  
can't fill.

He throws himself  
at me with a shriek,  
but Benjamin catches his tormentor  
before Wassermann's hands  
can wrap themselves  
around my throat.

### **The boy and the monster**

*slam*

onto the ground.  
The black house  
barely shivers.  
Violence is all  
it has ever known.

Benjamin seizes Wassermann  
by the collar of his fine suit,  
and his fist  
    connects  
    with  
the *vodník's* face.

The fury that moves  
over Benjamin's features  
is not born of hate;  
it's born of love.  
For me.  
For Issur and Lior.

For Pearl.  
For every child  
he couldn't save.

**Wassermann smiles,**  
    ravenous,  
through the blood in his mouth.  
*You can't win!*  
*You'll never win!*  
*This is my house, boy,*  
*and you*  
*are only*  
*another thing*  
*I own.*

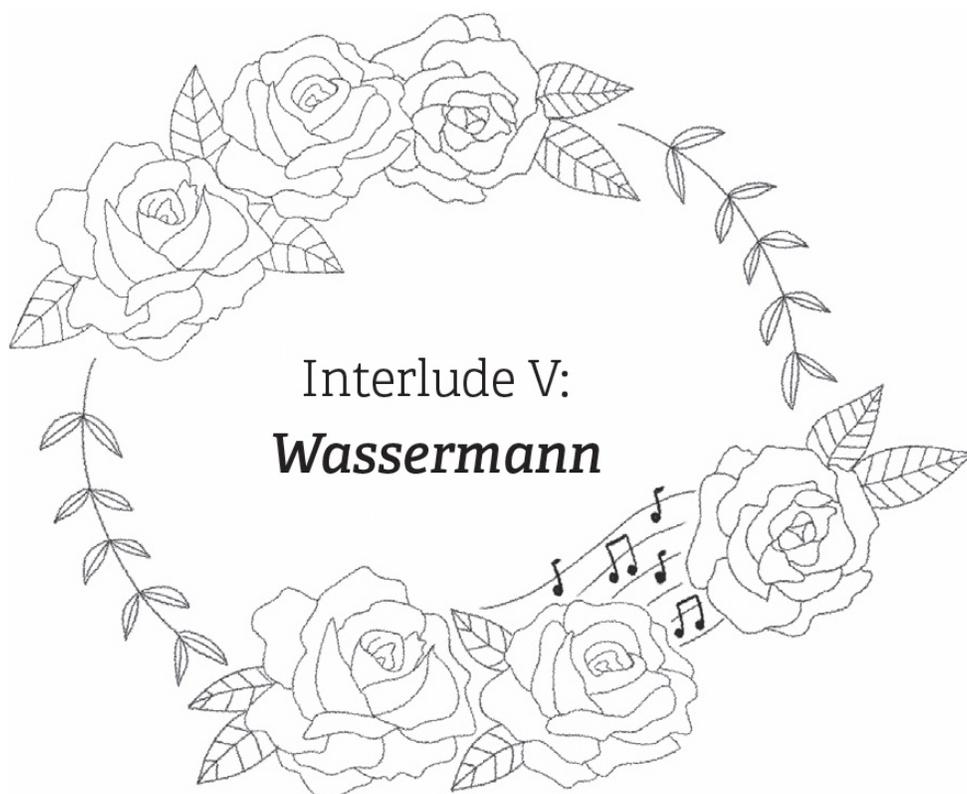
Benjamin  
raises his head.  
He knows the monster  
is telling the truth;  
he can't defeat Wassermann.  
But still he says:  
*Ilana,*  
*RUN!*

I didn't want  
to say goodbye  
like *this*.

But if I stay,  
Wassermann  
will destroy us  
with our love for each other.

So

I run.



Interlude V:  
***Wassermann***

**When I'm done with Benjamin,**  
there won't be enough of him left  
to scatter  
across the Vltava.

I am going  
to feel  
that brat  
*break*  
beneath my hands  
if it's the last thing  
I ever  
do.

And I'm going

to make Ilana  
*watch.*



## Chapter Forty-Three

**I'm spinning**  
down the hallway,  
music I can't understand  
crackling like fire  
in my head,  
notes I'll hear  
until the day I die.  
I tried—  
and I failed,  
completely.

Orpheus *always* fails.

But it's the thought  
of the man  
with his lyre  
    (who sang his way  
    into Hell  
    more sweetly  
    than I did)  
that finally  
    makes me  
        stop.

His instrument  
was his weapon,  
the place where he stored  
his agony,  
his love,  
his very soul.

And

at  
once  
I know  
where Wassermann  
has hidden  
the souls of the dead,  
why each time  
I played  
the black violin,  
I grew stronger  
and hungrier  
than before.

Magic will burn  
you  
up.

But I won't burn  
for Wassermann  
anymore.

**I race back to the nursery.**

But the black violin,  
the source of everything  
Wassermann is,  
isn't where I left it  
sleeping in its case  
on one of the beds.

It's in Pearl's arms.

The twins  
have taken shelter  
beneath a bed.

They cover their ears  
and shut their eyes tightly,  
wishing themselves  
anywhere  
but here.

I want to comfort the boys,  
but I need to use  
the few words I have  
to set them *free*.

*Pearl*, I say.

The strawberry girl  
hugs the violin against her chest,  
like another child  
would cradle a doll.  
*You can't have it!*  
*If you take it,*  
*you'll take me away*  
*from Onkel Wassermann!*

*Wassermann doesn't love you.*  
I hate bringing this truth to her;  
it's a basket of vipers  
I lay at her feet.  
But I have to.  
*He's keeping you*  
*from your family,*  
*from people*  
*who wouldn't ever*  
*steal parts of you*  
*to keep themselves*  
*alive.*

Pearl snaps:  
*Onkel Wassermann*  
*is my only family.*

**I open the story of Pearl's old life.**

(I can't  
give it back to her,  
but I can do this much.)

*Once upon a time,*  
*you had a toy rabbit,*  
*an apartment in Old Town,*  
*a history to call your own.*  
*You had a mother*  
*who danced with you,*  
*who laughed with you,*  
*who never frightened you.*  
*She was your home*  
*and you were hers.*

*Wassermann stole*  
*your mother from you*  
*and you from her.*

Pearl stares at me,  
a veil of impossible tears  
glittering in her eyes.  
Does she feel the emptiness  
where the memories of her mother  
and her life  
should be?  
I think  
she must.

I kneel in front of her.

*Pearl,  
there were other kids here.  
You knew them.  
Maybe they were even  
your friends.  
And now  
they're gone.  
But you don't have to vanish.  
Too many have already.  
Please, Pearl. Please.*

I hold my hand out  
and close my eyes.  
I won't take the violin  
from her.

Too much  
has been taken  
from her  
already.

***Lior and I***

*don't remember home either.  
Issur's voice  
creeps out from under the bed,  
even if he  
is too frightened to.  
But I remember  
playing  
with Miriam, Jan, and Moshe,  
eating dinner  
with Hana and Eva and Oskar.  
And I remember*

*when they all disappeared  
from the nursery.*

*It's scary here sometimes, Lior says,  
his eyes as wide  
as open doors.  
And I don't think  
home  
is supposed to be scary.*

**Pearl whispers:**

*I want to know  
why I feel lost.  
I want to know  
why I feel smaller and smaller.  
I want to go home...  
but I'm not sure where  
home is anymore.  
It's with these words  
that Pearl surrenders.*

She puts the black violin  
in my arms  
and I feel its power  
rising to meet  
my fingertips.  
I don't have time  
to hug Pearl.  
But I do anyway,  
crushing her  
against my chest,  
this butterfly-fragile child  
whose girlhood was devoured

by too many monsters.

**When you are a final girl,**

you run

for all the girls

who never made it this far.



## Chapter Forty-Four

**I reach the foyer of the black house**  
with its graveyard of shoes  
as Wassermann and Benjamin  
appear  
at the top of the stairs.

The monster descends,  
his fury so hot  
I'm surprised it doesn't  
burn us to ash.  
Wassermann's hand is curled  
like a tree root  
over Benjamin's shoulder.  
The boy's arm is twisted  
at an ugly angle;  
the blue of his eyes is bruised  
with despair.  
He believes  
I wasn't fast enough,  
that he couldn't rescue me.

I wish  
I could kiss hope  
back into his mouth.  
I wish  
I could tell him  
everything.

But there's no time.

***Do you have any idea who I am?***

*Do you have any idea  
what I'm going to do to you?  
Wassermann screams.*

*And  
I  
laugh.  
I can't help it.*

*I don't care  
who you are.  
I don't care  
what you're calling yourself.  
You're Bluebeard.  
You're Sauron.  
You're Hannibal Lecter.  
You're el Viejo del Saco.  
You're the valley of Gehenna,  
always hungry  
for something new  
to stuff  
into your black mouth.*

*And the only part  
of the story  
you matter in  
is the part  
where someone  
like me  
beats  
someone  
like you.*

***Ilana, come here!***

*You'll only make this worse  
if you don't!*  
Wassermann bellows.

The walls of the black house  
shudder.  
But I don't move.  
There's nothing left  
to pull me toward him,  
no reason for me  
to obey.

*Ilana!*  
Wassermann stamps his foot  
like he's Pearl's age.  
*Come here!*  
*Now!*

I grip the neck  
of the black violin  
so hard  
that the strings  
bite into my fingers.  
But I smile.

Wassermann's anger crumbles  
like dried rose petals.  
There's some new emotion  
writing itself  
across his face.  
He finally understands  
he's been wrong  
all along.  
He has

no power  
over me.

My soul  
is still  
my own,  
and my love  
is not weakness—  
it's my strength.

**I swing the violin**  
like a sword  
intent on burying itself  
deep inside  
the belly of a beast.

It strikes the wall;  
the impact travels  
up  
my  
spine  
into  
the deepest part  
of  
me.

**The broken violin**  
erupts  
in light  
and the black house  
exhales,  
a living thing  
filled with relief  
as its timbers snap,

its wallpaper tears,  
its ceilings sag  
beneath the weight  
of time.

I see dawn  
outside the nearest window  
as the glass  
cracks down the center.  
But it isn't until  
the light bulbs above me  
shatter  
that I run,  
Benjamin at my side.  
Pearl and the twins  
rush down  
the lurching stairs.  
Even their fear  
    (or love)  
of Wassermann  
is not enough to keep them here.

Benjamin and I  
pull the children close.  
*It's going to be all right,*  
he assures them,  
an older brother  
to the end.

The front door sticks  
when I try to open it,  
the wood  
suddenly warped

with all the ages  
it has seen.  
Panic dances  
in my chest  
before I dig  
my heels in  
and wrench it open.

**The dead and I spill**

back into the real world,  
where the monsters  
know to sheath their claws.

The symphony  
of destruction  
ends  
abruptly.  
The black house  
gives way,  
the crunch  
of rotten wood  
like bone  
as it  
comes  
tumbling  
down.

I'm no knight,  
but I think  
I may have just  
slain a dragon.



## Chapter Forty-Five

**I turn to see**

Benjamin,  
Pearl, Issur, Lior  
illuminated.

Not by the sun  
pouring through the clouds,  
but by something greater.

Our eyes meet  
over the blaze  
of this newly kindled light.  
One by one,  
the ghosts flicker and fade,  
their smiles  
shining with hope  
they didn't dare have before.

Benjamin cups my face  
in his hands.  
Galaxies pour  
from the tips of his fingers,  
bleeding stars so blue  
they could be  
the deepest part of a flame.  
In this moment,  
we're closer  
than we've ever been  
and farther apart.

**I've known what was coming**  
ever since the blue-eyed boy and I

watched the stars  
wheeling overhead  
in my aunt's garden.  
But who can prepare themselves  
for an ending?

I want to tell Benjamin:

*Wait.*

I want to beg him:

*Stay with me for all time.*

What I whisper instead:

*I love you, Benjamin.*

The outlines of his hands  
have begun to blur.  
But Benjamin's grin is as wide  
as the world  
he is about to leave behind.

*Ilana—*

*ikh hab dir lib.*

*Ilana—*

*miluji tě.*

*Ilana—*

*Ich liebe dich.*

*Ilana—*

*I love you.*

Then he  
    and the other children  
        vanish  
into the light.



## Chapter Forty-Six

**The black house is dead;**

the souls who were caged  
in it are free.

But Wassermann  
is very much alive,  
coughing  
and shaking the dust  
of his ruined home  
from his dark hair.

He holds his trembling hands  
in front of widening eyes.

The veins  
collecting at his wrists  
aren't silver anymore.

They're blue—  
like mine.

Without the souls,  
without the children,  
without anyone  
but himself,  
Rudolf Wassermann  
is perfectly ordinary—  
and perfectly human.

*What did you do?*

he screams.

*What did you do to me?*

Wassermann may be  
taller than I am,

but I feel like  
I'm looking down  
at *him*.  
*You're mortal now,*  
I tell him.  
*You'll live*  
*and you'll die*  
*like anyone else.*  
*Maybe it's time*  
*you started acting*  
*like a human being.*

**Wassermann pulls his arm back,**  
ready to strike me,  
when a man's voice calls out:  
*You!*  
*What are you doing*  
*with that girl?*

The  
(ex) monster and I  
both turn.  
A man stands in the bakery doorway  
a few buildings away,  
his arms weighed down  
with fresh bread.

I've never  
seen him before,  
but when he charges  
toward Wassermann,  
I know  
I'll remember

his face  
    (his map of wrinkles,  
    his drooping mustache,  
    even the smudge of flour  
    on his nose)  
for the rest of my life.

The baker asks me:  
*Is this man  
bothering you?  
Do I need to call the police?*

*There's no trouble!  
None at all!*  
Wassermann is breathless  
as he straightens his jacket.  
    (Or tries to.  
    There are two hundred years  
    of wrinkles  
    caught in the cloth.)

He retreats,  
a dusty young man  
in a city  
where thousands of others  
just like him  
are about to begin  
their days.  
Wassermann would have hurt me  
if he'd had the chance.  
He might try again  
when there's no good neighbor  
to chase him away.  
But I'm too tired to worry

about tomorrow;  
I only want to thank my rescuer  
and return home.



## Chapter Forty-Seven

### **Every step**

on my walk back to Aunt Žofie's  
takes a year;  
every mile  
takes a lifetime.

I duck beneath  
the Old Town Bridge Tower,  
where Benjamin and I  
first kissed,  
reaching for where  
he should be  
beside me  
and finding nothing  
but the cool morning air.  
Benjamin's gone.  
The World to Come  
is his home now.

And as this truth  
sinks into my heart,  
that's when  
the tears  
finally  
come.

### **I don't stop crying**

until I reach  
the Rose Hill cemetery,  
and that's only because  
I can't anymore.

There's blood  
in my veins,  
not water.  
I'm no mermaid,  
no *rusalka*,  
no *vodník*.  
I have to follow  
my own advice to Wassermann:  
I have to be a human girl  
and not  
someone else's myth.

**Without Benjamin,**  
Rose Hill cemetery feels empty—  
a body  
without a soul,  
a harp  
without its strings.

But the bluebirds still sing;  
the wind still whispers its Psalms  
over the *matzevot*.  
They don't know  
about Benjamin,  
Pearl,  
Lior and Issur,  
or any of the others  
buried here.

I set a stone  
on top of Benjamin's grave,  
and guide my fingers  
over the broken branch

etched above his name.

The sound of a real branch  
*snapping*  
pulls me to my feet.  
I fumble for the stone  
belonging to Benjamin's memory.  
    (I don't think  
    he'd mind  
    if I used it in self-defense.)

But Wassermann  
    (or some  
    lesser monster)  
hasn't come for me.

The newcomer is only an old man,  
as alive as the flowers  
in my aunt's garden.  
I breathe out  
a sigh.  
I'm safe.

***I've come to this hillside***  
*many times,*  
*stumbling around the trees,*  
*searching for the graves*  
*of my family, says the man.*  
The fringes of his tallit  
sway in the breeze.  
*But I only found them today.*  
*Do you know who cleared*  
*this cemetery?*  
My voice shakes

when I tell him:  
*I did.*

I've never seen  
another living person here;  
I was always alone  
with Prague's dead  
and my own.  
But it feels good to share this place  
with someone who understands  
how important it is.

There's a gloss of tears  
in the man's eyes  
as he stands beside me.  
He doesn't take  
my hands in his  
or stroke  
my ragged knuckles.  
That's fine.  
I'm not ready to be touched,  
not after Wassermann.

*Thank you, the old man says.  
Thank you for giving this place  
back its life.*

**We gaze at Benjamin's headstone**  
and the man's lips move  
as he forms the letters.  
*Do you know  
who he was?  
This Benjamin?*

Here is what  
spills out of me:  
*Benjamin died  
too young.  
He was kind.  
He drew the things  
he saw in his dreams.  
He couldn't dance  
but he could sing,  
and he was as brave  
as Prague's white lion.*

*He sounds extraordinary,  
the old man says.  
It's too bad  
you and I  
will not meet him  
in this world.*

*Yeah, I whisper.  
It is.*



## Chapter Forty-Eight

**In the kitchen of Rose Cottage,**

I feed Aunt Žofie the story of what happened  
during the dawn  
that seemed to last for days.

She slumps back  
in her seat,  
as if the meal is too dark  
and rich  
to stomach.

*And the vodník?  
Where is he?*

*Out there,  
somewhere.*

*Human...  
and broken.*

*I wanted to destroy him,  
but I think living  
might be a better punishment.*

Aunt Žofie hides  
the knife of her smile  
behind the teacup  
she lifts to her lips.  
She may not be a Lopez,  
but there is still plenty of wolf in her.

*Sometimes  
the cruelest thing of all  
is mercy.*

*He'll live*

*and grow old  
and die.*

*But what  
are you  
going to do now, Ilana?*

**The honest answer**

is also the shortest one.

*Live, I guess.*

*Make music  
even if my parents disapprove.*

*Life is too short,*

*too precious*

*to waste it*

*fitting yourself*

*into someone else's design.*

*And I'll remember*

*the dead and the lost,*

*even if no one else does.*

*Aunt Žofie's kiss*

*is butterfly soft*

*against my temple.*

*Good answers.*

**I can't explain to my friends**

(exactly)

what happened this summer;

I can't talk to them

about the time I spent

inside the black house.

But I should tell them

*something*

after so many weeks

of silence.

*I'm sorry  
I disappeared.  
I was dealing  
with a lot.*

*I didn't mean to ignore you.  
I don't hover  
around my phone,  
waiting  
for Sarah's  
or Martina's  
responses.  
But I promise myself,  
when they do reply,  
I'll try  
telling more of the truth  
than not.*

**What I email my parents:**

A declaration:

*I believe  
in myself;  
I believe  
in the extraordinary places  
my music will take me.  
Please,  
believe in me too.*

What I attach to the letter:  
a video of me  
playing the black violin.

*Trust that I've learned  
how to protect myself  
from what you're afraid  
may be lying in wait for me  
in the future.*

*Trust me  
and my choices.*

The response I receive:

*We're talking to your aunt.  
She told us  
about what you've done  
in the cemetery.  
She's impressed  
by how responsible you've been  
this summer.*

*Maybe  
we can compromise  
about your music  
when you come home.*



## Chapter Forty-Nine

### **If this were a movie**

(and it isn't,  
even if what happened  
in the black house  
feels like a dream now)

I'd walk away in triumph  
and never have to talk  
to Rudolf Wassermann again.

But Prague feels small,  
so it doesn't surprise me  
when I see Wassermann  
on the shore of the Vltava  
when September rises  
and I'm on the verge  
of returning home.

### **The monster**

(no more)  
waves his hands about  
as he tries to tell a pair of tourists  
how to use the swan boat  
they've rented.

His nose is red,  
raw,  
peeling,  
his shirt faded  
from being washed  
too many times.  
He doesn't look  
like an emperor

or a legend  
anymore.  
He looks  
like a painting  
that has spent too much time  
in the sun.  
I should feel vindicated.  
Wassermann has been brought low.  
But when he catches  
my eye,  
I see hate  
burning so brightly  
it could outshine  
every candle in St. Vitus Cathedral  
and Staronová synagoga.

I go to him anyway.

***You.***

He spits the word,  
sounding hoarse,  
sick,  
tired,  
*human.*

I answer:

*Me.*

**But Wassermann's old ways**  
are slow to die  
and it's a curse he hisses,  
over my head  
and the cradles of the children  
I've barely begun to dream of.

*You live beside the sea—  
I know that much, Ilana.  
And there are only  
so many cities beside oceans,  
where the people look like you,  
speak like you.  
One day, when you're not expecting me,  
I'll come for you  
and whatever children  
you may have.*

I don't allow myself to blink.  
I imagine  
I'm Bruncvík's white lion,  
unmoved,  
unafraid  
in the face of something hateful  
and wretched.

**I've been in a story**  
long enough to understand  
this much:  
a curse  
can be broken,  
a curse  
can be countered  
with a spell of my own.  
*Then I'll tell my daughters  
how I defeated you,  
and my sons  
how a kind boy  
outfoxed you.  
I'll be ready.*

They'll *be ready*.

*And if you ever  
try to find me,  
you'll lose again  
and again  
and again.*

*We will always  
outlive  
you.*

**I trust Wassermann's rage—**  
we aren't through.  
We may never be.

Anyone I ever love  
will have to hear  
my history  
and decide  
if I'm too crazy  
or dangerous  
to love back.  
But if love  
reduced the monster  
to *this*,  
his lower lip trembling  
as he tries to hold back  
a child's tears of frustration,  
I have to believe  
it will be strong enough again.



## Chapter Fifty

**There's no right song to accompany**  
my goodbye to Prague  
or the cemetery.

If I ever come back,  
it won't be the same.  
I'll follow my memories  
through the winding streets  
instead of a ghost  
with forget-me-not eyes.  
And any boy  
I might fall in love with here  
will be just as alive  
as I am.  
I try to let my hands  
and my heart  
memorize the letters  
on every *matzevah*,  
knowing  
I can't fit them all  
inside of me.

**I hold the name of Benjamin's sister**  
close to me.

Is Helena still alive,  
an old woman  
somewhere in America,  
with stories  
lodged in her bones?  
Does she still miss her brother—

long gone  
    (to her)  
but never forgotten?  
With enough research, I know  
I can find her  
or her descendants.

I want to tell them  
Benjamin's headstone is still cared for.  
I want to tell them  
someone still remembers him  
and always will.

**I still don't know**  
what it means to be  
a chapter in my family's history  
or even  
to be me.

Does it mean  
saying the Shema,  
waiting out a flood,  
sending a raven  
and a dove  
into a rain-soaked sky?

Does it mean  
moving across borders  
like water  
moves across stones?

Or does it mean knowing  
the Wassermanns of the world  
are always one step

behind you?

Maybe  
it's all of those things.

Maybe  
it's how I choose to live now,  
honestly  
and with courage.

**There is another world waiting**

around the corner  
for Benjamin and me,  
one I'll only see  
when my breath  
gives out  
and flowers grow  
from what's left of me.

But I'm not there yet.  
Which just means  
I'll have to do  
enough living  
for the both of us.



THE END



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