

I dream of an “upside-down city,” where an opalescent night sky dotted with twinkling orange-gold stars floats under the buildings instead of above.

In those dreams, I live in that city. It looks like the illustrations in books I read long ago. I can remember the smell of the cobblestones after rain, and the nostalgic familiarity of the windows shining with light. Crowds of people in colorful clothes live there, too, and four-wheel horse-drawn carriages travel in the spaces between massive brick buildings. The whole place feels like a toybox. “I want to go there, too. Where is it?” I would ask. “I don’t know,” you would reply. You laughed at me, but I wasn’t kidding.

Because I’ve been waiting here for so, *so* long, for the angels to descend from the upside-down city to take me by the hand.



Do you get this painful ringing in your ears when things get too quiet? The place where I am is like that. It’s a tiny room that’s all white – the walls, the ceiling, the door, everything, and it never changes. The desk, bookshelf, and bed are all lined up symmetrically, and the quill, books, water jug, and cookies lying on them are all white, too. Even the bit of sky I can see through the skylight is white. It’s all boring.

Aah, I just want to go back to sleep and dream about that city again. That place is such a delightful jumble of objects and colors that it makes being locked up in this tranquil room all the more suffocating. I’ve long since grown bored of this static, unchanging life I’m living. I just sleep the days away.

I don’t remember anything from when I was born.

In my earliest memories I was already living here, hearing caretakers tell me in toneless voices that I’m a “supremely precious existence.” They bring me books, and at three o’clock they bring cookies, too. But they also feel sort of floaty, like clouds – they don’t feel *real*. Everything in here is like that. It’s all shaped like how it’s supposed to look, but it’s been encased in this white something or other.

I don’t even know if the caretakers are machines or real people. Honestly, there might not even be more than one – all of them look the same, so for all I know they could all be the same person. They come in every day, and all they do is perform the same actions and repeat the same phrases. “May you spend your day peacefully and quietly,” they say. It’s been a long time since I realized that there was nothing reflected in their eyes.

Where is the upside-down city...? It’s not here, at least.

The air smells of sunshine. My hair flutters in the breeze. I can feel my feet thumping against the steady, firm cobblestones as I race along the pathways. And I can feel the warmth of a large hand gripping mine as we walk along... but none of that is real here.

When I opened my eyes to the white skylight overhead, my heart sank. When I looked at the clock, it was still too early for me to get up. But I slept more than enough – I wasn't going back to bed. I took in my surroundings. Everything was dead quiet, same as every night. The silence weighed heavy on my ringing ears. I scowled, conjuring up images of my dreams to escape the familiar pain.

And suddenly, I came up with the most brilliant idea.

*What if I broke the rules and went outside, to look for the city?*

I could find that wonderful place out there, see it with my own two eyes. Warm anticipation welled up deep in my gut at the thought. I didn't remember ever going outside before, but it was possible that my dreams were actually memories from when I was just a baby. It was honestly kind of odd that the idea hadn't crossed my mind before.

I stole from my bed on silent feet and gently opened the door just a crack. On the other side was a hallway with a rounded arched ceiling, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see seemingly without end. My legs froze. I was breaking the rules. My body was subconsciously warring with my mind.

For a while I stood there, completely motionless, hesitant, wavering. But eventually the excitement in my heart won out over the uncertainty, and I took my first bold step out of the door and headed down the hallway to the right.

I proceeded with caution, but no matter how far I walked I didn't see anyone else. Maybe there weren't that many people in the building. The thought reassured me, and soon enough my bare feet were positively flying down the endless white hall as fast as they could go. It wasn't long before I ran out of breath, though – I was always running around everywhere in my dreams, but I'd never pushed myself like that in real life.

I had to pause to catch my breath. I'd ended up in some kind of atrium, where the ceiling was so high I couldn't even see it. The gigantic white stone walls around me were dotted with dozens of passageways stretching out like wedges. It was a big area, but it had this cooped-up feeling to it, like I'd stumbled into a prison, that left me struggling to breathe.

There were plenty of paths to choose from, but I knew I was going to end up lost no matter what I did. I chose the route straight ahead.

- All I could hear was the tapping of my feet echoing in the vast space as I walked endlessly onward. The halls were dim, lit only by flickering electric lights spaced evenly along the walls. I kept glancing back over my shoulder, wondering when the caretakers would finally notice I was gone and come chasing after me.

My sense of time grew warped in this ever-repeating loop of identical halls with identical walls. Anyone who experienced it once would understand the fear brewing in my heart, not knowing if I was actually progressing forward or if I was going in circles. I began to grow discouraged when I continued to see no change in my surroundings, and the thought of turning back gnawed at my mind what felt like hundreds of times.

But finally, I spied it – an exit off in the distance, a literal light at the end of the tunnel. The faint shine peeking through the cracks dispelled any doubts I had. Secretly, I felt like crying at the sight.

I rushed up to the exit at the end of the hall and peeked through to see the largest space I'd ever seen in my life. The area looked to be some kind of place of worship, laid out in three aisles. Off to the right, in the depths by the altar-looking thing, a ten-meter-tall geometric monument hung on the wall. The chairs where people would sit were unreasonably massive. Only two people were inside, each standing guard at opposite ends of the room. I snuck forward through one of the side aisles, hiding in the shadows of the pillars, heading through a lobby on the opposite side of the altar, and eventually reached a door that looked like it led outside.

I scanned my surroundings as I opened the door, but as soon as I turned my eyes outside, I was blinded by overwhelming panic. The "whiteness" was suddenly assaulting my entire body. I somehow managed to swallow the scream that threatened to erupt and slowly, carefully, opened by stinging eyes a crack, and eventually, I began to make out a faint image wavering in front of me. ... An endless sea of white earth and white sky.

That was the first view I got of the outside.

Once I cautiously confirmed there was no one around, I dashed outside the building, feeling the loose earth scatter underneath my feet like sand and dust the backs of my legs. It wasn't hot. I shouted in delight, unable to contain my excitement. I'd only ever seen a slice of sky through the skylight in my room, and now the whole wide open expanse in its infinite glory was mine to enjoy. For some reason, laughter bubbled out of me. I pressed a hand against my pounding chest and darted up a sloping white hill.



Everywhere I went in the outside world was a never-ending white desert under a colorless sky, occasionally interspersed with round pillar constructions that sprouted from the ground like peppermint. At first I was on guard every time I saw one of them, but no matter how long I watched them I never saw any signs of people, just the structures themselves jiggling around every so often as they changed shapes.

Eventually I grew bored of the monotonous landscape, and as I walked along I couldn't stop my doubts from floating to the surface. What time was it? Where could I find the city?

... What would I do if I couldn't find it?

Would the caretakers' frozen faces change at all if they knew I was missing...?

I was tired, spacing out, walking through the world with only my increasingly incoherent thoughts for company. But soon enough, I realized that the land around me was changing.

... The first oddity I noticed was "smell." The scent of fresh grass laden with evening dew wafted through the air. It was the smell of a humid night.

It was a sensation I'd only known in my dreams. The vague, floaty sense pervading the world had suddenly gained something tangible, something to give it definition. A chill shuddered its way down my spine.

The next thing I noticed was "sound." A rustling sound overhead, the sound of leaves on a tree swaying in the wind.

... Yes, trees were growing around me. I hadn't noticed them at first. And when I glanced around, I could hear the faint chirping of insects. Everything together created this unshakeable sense of nighttime.

"... What is this place?"

I'd ended up in a forest in the dead of night, just like the places I saw in my dreams. I'd meant to go outside - was I just dreaming again? But even as I realized that the air around me, heavy with moisture, coiled around me like a shroud, I shook off my uneasiness and continued to climb the hill.

I had to see what lay ahead with my own eyes. And when I thought that I might see the upside-down city that very night, my frozen legs managed to push onward.



What I found at the top was a strange silhouette of a building.

The weathered white rectangle was haphazardly constructed, like a child working with toy blocks, and above it stood a line of lonely looking radio towers pointed up at the heavens. I stared at it for some time, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, but looking closer I eventually spotted a small set of double doors at the bottom, in the same pure white color as the walls around it. There was no handle. I tried pushing on it instead. The hinges creaked.

Slowly, timidly, I pushed further, until the door opened just enough to peek inside. It was surprisingly bright on the other side, and wider inside than the outside led me to believe. White pillars stood scattered unevenly around the space, and a small, illuminated display twinkled in their midst. Heartened by the light, I slipped inside the mazelike building without further delay and began to slowly but surely creep my way forward.

What was this building for? I glanced around as I went. The pillars looked similar to the structures outside, and on closer inspection they were also slowly changing shape. Maybe I could learn more if I looked at my surroundings from the rooftop, where the radio towers were.

I kept my eyes peeled, wondering if there was any way for me to get up there, but it wasn't until I faced forward again that I saw it, a tiny yelp escaping my lips. A spiral staircase reaching all the way to the ceiling had suddenly appeared while I hadn't been looking.

"But this wasn't here before...."

This day had been one odd thing after another, but I could still be surprised. I craned my neck, staring up at the spiral that slowly faded into darkness, too far for the light to reach.

The handrails creaked under my touch. I stretched myself up as far as I could, trying to see just how far it went, but even on my tiptoes I couldn't see the end of the seashell-like spiral. It was paralyzingly high, that much was certain. Fear suddenly gripped my heart.

(Should I go back...? If I act innocent enough, I probably could. No one's come after me tonight, thankfully... and I even left that kid alone in the room, too....)

But even with those thoughts swirling in my head, my legs still unconsciously rose onto the first step. The handrail curved like a living, breathing being, and it had a lavish mosaic pattern on it, but it was still old, and it groaned with every step.

Trembling, I continued my journey up. Somewhere in the middle I couldn't help but peek down and saw the yawning pitch-black pits of Hell opening below, forcing me to hurriedly avert my gaze back up. The entire day had been nothing but stressful. It was just one unending nightmare, and frankly, I was getting sick of it. All I wanted was to go see the city. Onward and upward I climbed, growing more desperate by the minute.

Finally, though, I saw the top of the staircase. I climbed the final steps to find a short pathway leading to yet another set of double doors. I ran up without thinking, pressing a hand to my chest with a relieved sigh. I threw my entire body against the heavy doors, and when they opened, a gentle breeze kissed my face as the world opened up before my eyes.

A sea of stars stretched in all directions above me. From the roof of the white building, the uniform indigo sky had transformed into a brilliant gradient of azure and jade green. The heavens above glittered like blue topaz, the stars twinkling like pearls reflecting light.

And sitting there in the center of my vision was the thing I'd been searching for all this time: the upside-down city.

"... I finally found it!"

My heart throbbed in my chest at the sight. I couldn't help the shout of delight that unconsciously spilled out of me.

The world overflowed with color. The city bustled with energy, with people the size of poppy seeds and horse-drawn carriages flitting back and forth between oddly shaped roofs. But... no, the city was floating in the midst of such faraway stars. There was no way I could see all that.

But even still, from somewhere in that faint, flickering upside-down city, I could catch a whiff of a creature that didn't exist here.

I knew that place. Because - because I wanted to return to that place. I'd always wanted to return.

" "

I heard a voice calling. It said a familiar name.

... Name? But I didn't have one of those. I stretched my hand up to the heavens, to the city, my chest aching with longing and pain....

"... Gin?"

And a tiny voice reached my ears.

I gasped, lowering my hand and twisting my head around frantically. Whatever sound I was going to make next died in my throat, strangled by a rolling wave of shock. I had been on the roof of the white building just now, but suddenly, everything around me had changed.

- Well, no, not everything. The glittering sky still looked the same. But at some point, the rooftop had vanished, replaced by a field of short, swaying grass. Cicadas sang gentle songs in the evening light. A dirt path wound ahead of me, faintly damp - maybe it had just rained - and amid the fluttering stalks of golden grass stood evenly spaced poles, large and ash gray.

And in the middle of the dew-laden, shining field, was a boy with golden hair that I knew oh so well, quietly looking my way.

"You came...?"

I rushed up to him, thinking he'd followed me out of the room, but then I saw the triangular ears poking from his head and skidded to a halt. Were those - were those *animal* ears? And looking closer, this boy's eyes were the color of pomegranate, not the shade I was familiar with.

... No, this wasn't *him*. I eyed him cautiously. The boy with animal ears opened his mouth and spoke once more.

“I see... so this place can recreate the memories of whoever enters it.”

“... What are you talking about?... Who are you?”

“Sorry. I thought you were someone else. My memories must’ve interfered with yours when I called out to you.”

“I have no idea what you’re saying, but... I know someone who looks a lot like you, too.”

A large scarf covered much of the boy’s face, but take away the ears and eyes and he really did look a lot like the one I lived together with in my room.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

The boy’s eyes, expressionless up until now, suddenly swam with unease. “... I’m looking for something I lost. Something I need to go back. But I’ve been looking for a long, long time, and I haven’t found it.” With his head hung low, his golden hair masking his scarlet eyes from view, he could have been *his* twin.

“Something you lost...? Do you want me to look with you?” He wasn’t the person I knew, but my mouth automatically opened anyway. The boy’s behavior reminded me so much of him, I couldn’t just leave him be.

But when I tried to shuffle closer, the boy simply gave a tiny smile and an even tinier shake of his head from within his overlarge scarf. He pointed up at the sky. “This is the edge of the world – a space where our worlds collided. You can’t stick around here if you don’t have the right qualifications... and besides, our time is up. Your ride’s here.”

“My what?”

Just then, a round geometric pattern expanded in midair, and a pillar of white light enveloped the area around me.

“... Thanks, my other –”

I thought I could hear his voice fading into the distance, but the light was too bright. My eyes screwed shut.

The last thing I remember from that day is looking up at a downpour of feathers in the world of white, and my fingertips brushing against tough skin.