

Beyond Omelas

Tina Phan

Artist's Statement

In the ostensible utopia that is Omelas, Ursula Le Guin writes that there is an unspoken ritual that keeps the city in balance: a child, captive and living in filth, with the whole city knowing. But not everyone is complacent. Those who leave Omelas “keep walking...straight out of the city of Omelas...out into the darkness of the fields...ahead into the darkness...a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness.” What I am focused on is this: those who retreat do so into the **darkness**. Le Guin writes that it is “even less imaginable...than the city of happiness,” and indeed—to be in darkness is to be, consequently, unknowable. And what is more frightening, yet simultaneously more *exciting*, than being *unknowable*?

In my photographic series *Beyond Omelas*, I explore the idea of retreating into darkness. If the entity of darkness is interpreted in Le Guin's context, it can be understood as a place to grow into oneself and develop an identity away from the conventions and collective understandings of society. Rippling sheets obscure the subject from the viewer's eye in some photographs, rendering only their silhouette visible, while shadows become the subject itself in other pieces. Poses of outstretched arms and a wrapped figure whose back is facing the camera hearken to ideas of cocooning and then growth, aligning with Le Guin's larger assertion that to develop different, uniquely individual understandings of right and wrong, we must first go into the darkness and become unknowable.





