In Tokyo, the sky was sunless. The lifespan of a human being was halved.
Scientists theorized about the quality of the air; how the closer you lived to the capital, the more, over time, your immune system got wrecked. The doctors called it nighttime-over syndrome. The doctors gave you pills and you ate them. On your better days, the tingling in your hands and the dizziness deafened like someone had turned the volume of your nerves all the way down. On your better days, the light pollution of the city made the falling flecks of ash look like snow.

* * *

On your worse days, you stayed inside and fell out of your body. In bed, the exhaustion burned away.
For months, you watched the movement of clouds outside your window until you suspected they were no longer clouds. You drew the curtains so you wouldn’t have to face it. You watched yourself get thinner. You watched TV.
Outside, people could be so loud it was almost violent. You were routinely expected to smile or nod on cue, to say something. Your tongue watered in the motion of language and never stopped.

* * *

The hours we are open for business: 8:00 p.m. to 5 a.m. This is on weekdays.
Weekends we are much more generous. You can pick for us a song and we will go onstage with you. We will sit on your lap and compliment the color of your tie. My body is attuned to these gestures, everything well-practiced.

My body instinctively wakes at noon. It knows when the crime dramas are on, the ones with gangsters who are handsome
and tease their hair every morning, powder their gums. I like how they speak to each other, in code, how much you can interpret when they say they’ll take care of you.

When I was fourteen, a friend of my mother offered to take care of me. Her name was Lise. I said Please. I said Yes.

All she had to say about the place was this: In Tokyo, if you are pretty and willing, fortune will come, then love, then purpose. In Tokyo, the sun is eclipsed by smoke.

About the second part she was right.

As a rule, sex is ill-advised. Kyrien says this is bad for business, and we are in the business of selling dreams. “There are plenty of venues they can go to if sex is what they want.” All they need to do is look for the signs that say LIVE GIRLS REAL LIVE GIRLS, which makes me wonder where they put the dead ones. We extend a discount their first time around, but after that a customer must choose from the menu which girl to be his main. He scans the laminated photos and our false names, dragging his pointer finger down the list as though he is about to order a nice, bloody steak. I seat him in a booth and say to him, “Yes, sir,” “Yes, master.” With his hand on my thigh, I guide him toward my station. I escort him to the bathroom and wait at the door with a hot towel ready. I smile until my teeth hurt and the corners of my mouth feel pinched.

In the dark of my room, giant mouths open so wide that birds might as well be leaping out of them. I lie on my stomach for optimal viewing pleasure. I watch for their names:

PUMPKIN
HONEY BUNNY
WAITRESS
SHOT LADY
LONG HAIR YUPPIE-SCUM

The screen demands nothing of me.

In spy movies, assassins call each other professionals because they provide a service. But killing people does not always pay the rent. The world will never see you as human. So they perform:

private investigator, agent, security guard, cleaner. Off-hours, I’ll
see my customers walk by in the street but they will pretend not to know who I am. It’s part of an unwritten agreement we share. I’ll do what you ask, and no one has to know.

The law deems our work legal but unskilled. What could be easier than loving and enduring another person, they say. What could possibly be harder, I think to myself.

At night in bed, lying still, I have to remind myself, too, that I’m a real person.

My mother said I needed to honor my roots while I was growing up, I needed to be strong, decisive as a woman. I decided on names I would carry when I left but I didn’t call myself any of them. I didn’t believe in consequences.

Since I am the lowest-earning girl, Kyrien makes me wipe down everything and clean the bathroom before we open. Afterwards, I am supposed to bow to her, deeply, and say, “Please teach me how to be a good hostess.” I am supposed to actually say that. She teaches me how to use tongs when handling ice. No rattling the cubes. While pouring liquor, one mustn’t let the bottle tap against the rim. Use one hand to shield the customer from getting splashed. While shielding the customer, stir. Quietly, she says, and looks me in the eye to make sure I’m listening. Her brown hair cascades down in loose ringlets like a doll’s. Gold highlighter shimmers off her cheekbones.

Some nights I look into my mirrored face. I touch the imprints on my cheeks left behind from the smog masks I wear. Is this going to be permanent? The bathroom fluorescence makes the lines appear deeper than they are.

Attention, she snaps. Offer the customer’s drink with both hands. When you propose a toast, do so with both hands. Do you hear me? With the utmost respect. Your highball in the lower position as it clinks the lip of his.

Finally, she teaches me how to use a lighter, cupping it just so. To demonstrate, she presents me with the flame, so close it might appear that she is offering for me to breathe it in and swallow. “Do you understand now?” The smell of alcohol is making me dizzy, but I tell her I do.
We are not the only hostess club in Shinjuku. I know this because Elena has been around the pink-light district. I teased her about it once: “Is there an addiction you’re not telling me about?” and she huffed and made a face. “I’m just winding down. Besides, I like how it feels,” she said, “to be the one who pays.” She never offers to take me with her but I’m more than okay with this. We see each other every day. We share a bed. I figure this has to count for something.

This week she found a high-rise with a touch-screen directory. The elevator had velvet walls and a mirrored ceiling and she picked the last floor, the twenty-third, because for the span of two minutes she was absolutely alone and she had never in her life heard so much quiet.

A woman in a black sheath escorted her to the VIP lounge. Going through the doors, she noticed the booths sectioned off with glass partitions. The gray walls, patterned in sprigs. All those chandeliers. And the women! Their permed hair, their dresses like ball gowns.

Here, Elena pauses as if to will the memory alive again. She is ten years older. She imagines a woman I don’t know how to be. When I ask if she had fun, she muscles a dead smirk. We are paid to tell people we love them every night. “I love you. I love you. I love you,” we hear them say back to us. I almost believe her. “What else?” I say, picking at the frayed hem of my dress.

“Well, there was one last thing.” She remembers the tables, huge, long enough for ten people to sit around and each glowing as white as a TV screen tuned to nothing. She remembers how, within the surface, she couldn’t find herself reflected, just a melting plane of light and glass, wide as a door to another planet.

My face wrinkles up in pain when I try to smile for her. Chin up, Kyrien always says. You are a woman.

In our building, there are no elevators. The closest thing we have to a directory is a sign posted at the door that reads “Girls Bar the Moon Lounge” in faded blue chalk. Unlike other clubs, our walls are bare, but we have video monitors to sing along to and tall rubber plants by the reception counter and an aquarium next to the bar. On the opposite end is the stage, a portable thing you can fold out and stand on. There are no curtains. No chandeliers.
Before we open, we spend an hour practicing our moves for tonight’s Showtime. This week is cat-themed. It’s what the customers love best, all of us in swimsuits, collars and cat-ear headbands, the bells from our necks tinkling as we hop around onstage.

My one shot at the moon. My one continuous night world.

At noontime, I see movie thugs flip through stacks of rubber-banded cash. I see them divide blocks of it among each other, or stuff them into duffel bags, driving away to foreign coasts where no one knows what they’ve done to earn that money, so much you could buy ten houses, even a new life. In line at FamilyMart, I pay with coins. A foam cup of Nissin noodles. Onigiri. Calbee chips. I wait until the deep wound of my hunger turns monstrous.

We girls have our pick from the menu: pineapple coolers, cassis, wine that isn’t really wine but grape juice in disguise. Sometimes the customer prides himself in choosing. He picks whiskey, rum, Asahi Super Dry, and a brand of vodka that tastes like gun metal and salt. In this country, refusal translates to rudeness, extreme self-importance. Our hair is well-ironed and warm. We do not wish to be rude. We end the night in laughter, the floor beneath us softly spinning, and then we go upstairs to vomit blood.

It’s the gropers who let me order the grape juice. I don’t understand how this works but I don’t fucking question it. They gently finger the holes in my tights just above the knee. I touch my lips to the flute and hold it there, as if inhaling the breath of god.

In my first year, I had bouts of insomnia when, panicked and sweating, I lay motionless, not knowing where I was.

Devon said I was lucky, that most immigrants had it worse: rickets, for example; brain cancer. Isobel called it nighttime-over syndrome, a depression brought on by lack of sunlight. Purely physical, she’d said. The headaches were gone by then and all I wanted was sleep and for my hands to be still.

Kyrien had the most winning advice: “Just think of it as the common cold. This too shall pass.” Like I was shifting from one
person to another, caught in the space where nothing was familiar. On the worst days, she let me take off from work and Elena, during her breaks, would bring me tea and snacks from the kitchen and sit with me for a while, watching TV.

One night she took me to a basement bar, our booth enclosed by high wooden panels. We both agreed how much nicer it was to hear people laughing behind us, the heated rush of their voices and shuffling in their seats, but otherwise we were safe. Tucked away. We spooned curry rice into our mouths. We drank water. A candle shrouded us in a veil of red light and, despite the breaths that left our bodies, it never went out.

“We could really just ditch and run, you know that? Go anywhere,” she said and I could have kissed her right there and gotten away with it.

“We could move to the end of the world,” I said. “Australia, New Zealand, take your pick.”

She put her head on my shoulder. “Seriously? There’s nothing but deserts that way.”

“Did you know some deserts haven’t gotten rain for hundreds of years? I mean hundreds.”

“My god. Where do you find this stuff?”

“TV. They air it late, all these nature documentaries. There was one last night about a place where the sky is always red. It’s beautiful in pictures, but nothing lives there.”

“No kidding. Here’s a million-dollar question. How the hell did life find a way here?”

Then I asked where she really wanted to go. I expected her eyes to brighten with ideas but she sat up straight and began patting the ends of her hair, like her hair was a rope her hands were desperate to climb. “Back in time,” she said. “When manipulating time becomes a thing. But until then . . . I guess to the shore.”

“You hate open water,” I pointed out. We both did.

“Not to swim or anything. But the feeling of lying there and looking out at it. Tell me you’ve never wanted that. With no else around. Just you.” Her hands were calm now, still in her lap. She wasn’t looking at me but at the candlelight.

I loved her, but she didn’t know half the things I wanted. The million-dollar question. I wished I would know how to love deeply. The more time we spent together, the less I knew.

“I might have to quit soon,” she said. “You know how in mov-
ies people say I’m too old for this shit?”

“You know how in movies people say, Take me with you?” And it sounded meaner than how I felt.

Before we met, she temped at a construction office. They required a high school education but waived it because her dad was the V.P. He managed sales and engineering. Whenever they fought, she called him the Overseer.

My favorite story was the one about the phone. Someone had called to leave a message and recorded hold music instead. It sounded so classical, strings, piano, a symphony crinkled with static. She deleted every other message. She twisted the cord around her fingers. Whenever she was sad, she would press the phone against her ear, and listen to it all the way through. Gold-tinged instruments, framed murals of saints. Four minutes of this, and most days that was enough.

Tonight, the pills in her hand are yellow and luminous. They make her less sensitive to cold, so now she’s able to get out more. She used to tell me how impossible this was as a kid, how wind shot through her bones like they were nothing but exposed roots and rain made her legs go numb. This was before the vitamins and antibiotics. Before the counseling when her parents thought she was making it up. She doesn’t call them anymore. She doesn’t tell them about relapsing, those moments she feels rain needling her feet or hands even though she’s indoors. Or when she hears the slow beat of her heart at random. Facing her in bed I listen to the rise and fall of her breath, making sure. We sleep like this during the day, our socked feet entangled, and wake up apart.

After she drifts off, I can’t get comfortable. I stretch my legs in the tub. I search the medicine cabinet. Elena’s bottle has a yellow cap and yellow sleeve and I twist open the cap and shake. Inside, little chinks of light rattling like teeth.

In the bath I draw my knees up. I bow my head. For a time I am centered, invulnerable.

I imagine Elena on the shore, without me, taking in all that quiet. I imagine myself in a valley where I could be anyone. Red skies. Hulking gravel formations. The painted bodies of deer incised on rock, preserved forever. My hands passing over this. In
life there are landscapes borderless and hot, but within me, in my head, they are edged with frost, as if recovering from the harshest winter. I touch the pill in the center of my palm. I press it into my skin and roll it down my lifelines, the glow and warmth of it dissolving into me.

* * *

Isobel and I are in the changing room a half-hour early, getting dressed. She is wearing her snakeskin Louboutin pumps, some French designer who I think is dead now. Her pale skin is threaded in glitter.

Isobel is the club’s No. 1 girl, and this doesn’t surprise anyone, really. She can hold her liquor, enough to sell at least three full bottles of champagne a night. Her best customer, a bank executive, is paying her rent at some upscale complex in Shinagawa. The fucking waterfront, and Elena says it doesn’t get much better than that. We share a cramped room one floor above the Moon Lounge and the layout goes like this: twin bed-futon-TV-closet. I bet Isobel could flip cartwheels in her place.

She rubs the scab where the leather has cut like a serrated edge into her heel. She winces. She endures.

I can’t help but watch her sometimes, her mouth open in joyous laughter as the men crowd her booth, with a mix of hate and admiration, her ease of getting in character, so fucking absolute and sure.

I imagine my internal organs shutting down like faulty overhead lights. I wake up not knowing where my body begins and ends, or if it weights anything at all. I touch the walls and they feel warm, like skin. I ask Elena what to do but her voice gets eaten up by the dark. I ask Kyrien, and she tells me to endure.

* * *

The best way I can put it is this: my vision goes black and white and I get this rushing sound in my ear. The right one. Like I’m in the biggest waterfall. A jet engine screams in my left.

My skin vibrates.

My body is separating. I feel it now when I’m awake.
You’re not going crazy. It happens. It’s stress.
But what if it’s a symptom? Some diseases that kill you faster never hurt like you think they will. Uterine cancer in rabbits, for example? You’d never know.

Hey. I need to tell you something and you’re just gonna have to trust me on it. Bear with me for a sec. Mai. You ever hear that saying about the woman who thinks too much?

No? What saying.
That if you let it, your subconscious will eat you alive.

* * *

I am hurling things into a canyon at daybreak. Small and brittle to start with, silverware, glass. I listen for the bright clink of their bodies against the rocks. I crane my neck over the cliff and watch everything I own glitter like stars that have been shot down, or disappear into the river. I toss what my hands can bear the weight of—floor lamps, chairs, nightstands, silver platters of food, a chandelier—and wonder what sound my bones would make as they punched through the surface of all that blue, sucked slow into the foam.

* * *

Isobel gives me half a tablet of Ecstasy, speckled with mint green, small as a fingernail. She cups my cheek, her eyes unexpectedly kind, and says I will sleep better, I won’t dream. But she is wrong. I dream of eels and I dream of dogs. I dream of calves lying on their sides near a slowly thinning river. I dream of tailless scorpions cupped in my hands. I dream of crickets singing so brightly their wings could break and I dream of rabbits up on the branches of trees. I am in the middle of a flowerless plain. I hold my ear low to the grass so I can listen. I am listening.

* * *

For my twentieth birthday, Elena gets me a card and a bunch of videotapes, all American. As a joke, she writes: Tell me how much you hate everything. I arrange the VHS covers on our bed: Kill Bill, Reservoir Dogs, Natural Born Killers, and Jackie Brown. In this country, the number twenty is special because it is the age at which you are legally able to drink and vote. We joke that I have been twenty for a
long time, that in the Moon Lounge women like us never get older. There are no clocks in the Lounge to help us keep track of rotations but we don’t need them. Every thirty minutes, we alight from table to table. Refill the glass. Smile. Lock your jaw and the corners of your mouth in place. Reciprocate. Our bodies just know.

Elena puts on Reservoir Dogs first. We don’t talk, even to guess out loud who is the fake out of all the bad men. We relish not using our mouths to communicate. Afterwards, in complete silence, we sign messages with our tongues, our fingers, while the shower burns hot.

Elena loves horror movies. She likes to think of us as vampires because vampires never age. The two of us feasting on a dismembered arm, stalking bad men in the night. “Come here,” she says, and I go to her. The TV is displayed on top of a rolling cabinet at the foot of my bed. I kneel before it and touch the screen and see the grainy outline of myself inside. Dust furrows the lines of my palm.

After twenty, the next special number is not for many more years. Sixty, which isn’t considered a birthday at all, but a rebirth-day, the completion of a person’s life cycle and the beginning of the next. Kyrien has eight years left before she becomes a new person. If somehow I could file as a permanent resident, I wonder if I could stay here and live to sixty and begin as someone else, too.

They call this process naturalization. The word makes me think of a cure. Something meant to expel the venom inside of me. But what is it that I’m trying to cover up?

The Retired Cab Driver says, “Give us a story. Make it good.” The Executive leans into me, his lips puckered on a Pianissimo, which I light. I am a good hostess. I recall the lines, I lived in caves with birds the size of small whales. The secret to communicating is knowing how to mirror the sounds coming at you. Consider this: a series of guttural clicks was all you needed to find each other in the dark. “Isn’t that precious,” the Retired Cab Driver says.
The Americans graying at the temples consistently praise my grasp on the English language. Their language, they like to remind me.

The usual questions:
Where are you from again? Aren’t you a long way from home?
You must know how to dance, don’t you? It’s in your blood.
Can you speak Asian?
Do you eat fish?
Can you use a fork?

A better story. I tell them my parents were born lowlanders. I tell them we lived near forests where the river swelled above tree-tops for months. Our house hovered tall on poles for this reason and from a distance appeared to float, to hold itself steady against the rising current. Some days, if the weather had calmed, I’d plop my naked self into a tub and paddle circles around the house, just to prove I could. Summers I helped my mother sell buckets of fish and yellow berries, soft spines dangling from the skin, out of her boat in the market. We wore the same orange aprons for hours. Together we called out to everyone who rowed past. Together we smiled for the odd tourist and his picture. Alone I watched my mother’s eyes turn hard in the shade. Together we waited. For years—and here, their eyes go wide with pity—this was my life.

I’m fixing a third whiskey sour for somebody new. This guy at the bar—wearing a red leather jacket, his hair sticking out in all directions—picks a record and asks me to get onstage with him. The song is a wartime favorite in this country. I push his glass across and say no; he gets pissed. He yells about brown island girl trash, his mouth full of stale peanuts, as he proceeds to fall off his stool.

I help him up, get him a towel, only because Kyrien will give me hell if I don’t.

During my breaks I go upstairs to our room and shut myself in the closet until my twenty minutes are up. The dark smells of lavender, and I scoot into the farthest corner, past mounds of boxes and heavy shoes, trying to make a space for myself. My head gets swimmy in florals.

There are times I just sit here and listen to the sound our
clothes make when I run my hand along the edges. The shush of
garment bags and silk over my head. And there are times I just sit
here.

The singing downstairs grows out of tune, distant. Finally I
can hear myself breathing.

The qualifications for a hostess:
FEMALE 16-34 YEARS OLD
HEIGHT 5’3” ABOVE
BODY SHAPE SLIM AND ATTRACTIVE FIGURE
MUST HAVE PLEASING PERSONALITY
MUST BE IN GOOD HEALTH CONDITION WITH
GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS
TRAINING SEMINAR CERTIFICATES AND 2X2 PHOTO

On the day of my audition, I wore a three-digit number taped
to my chest. I practiced in Japanese how to introduce myself, and,
just in case, how to count from one to one hundred. I practiced
how to ask for the time, how to order food, how to say my mother
was vanishing and my father was dead, how to call for help, how
to say I was lost and could someone help me figure out in which
direction I should go? But the judge did not ask me any of these
things. The judge was a tall Japanese man with a hard line for a
mouth. He said, Turn around, walk. He said, 笑って. Smile. Sing.
And I obeyed.

After my name was called, the last out of twenty girls selected
for placement, I went into the bathroom and washed my face. I
dampened a paper towel and pressed it into my red lips as if I were
cauterizing a wound. Then I scrubbed and scrubbed.

Standing in front of a dressing-room mirror that afternoon,
me in a sleeveless lavender gown, Lise brushed my bangs aside and
told me to look.

You are going to break so many hearts.
She said I would make something of myself and my mother
would be proud, happier than she’d ever been, and I believed
her. She warned against domestic labor because a woman alone
in a stranger’s house was a woman at risk. A woman alone was a
woman at risk. She said hostessing was more lucrative anyway
and hadn’t I always dreamed of going to dance school? Hadn’t I
grown up, like most little girls, wanting to sing? She said the first
term would last three years, enough to pay for my training, medical
checkup, certification fee, and the cost for my passport. She said
I was beautiful. Perfect for the job. I signed a blank contract. She
promised me a new life.

What else did Lise promise? I would get my passport on the
way home. She would have it upon meeting me at the airport in
Manila. “Imagine how many doors this will open up for you!” she
said. Until then, I am safer this way, as long as I stay inside the
club instead of lingering in the streets, away from the police and
others who would hurt me.

Our bedroom has one window, on Elena’s side, and Taito Sta-
tion swallows up the view.

On weekday mornings, people arrive early to the arcade.
Schoolgirls wearing blue pleated skirts and red ribbons looped
around their collars. They form a trio around the bike racks and
smoke, laughing about something other people can’t see.

I slide the tape into the VCR and wait for the crackling blue
screen to darken. Reservoir Dogs again. I’ve watched it so often that
the faces of the bad men melt for a split second and their colors dis-
solve and stretch away. I think of how an artist begins a drawing,
smearing graphite with the clay-like nub of her eraser, and rubs the
gray with her fingers into the vague semblance of a person, and I
feel my edges blur, too.

The fortune-teller lives inside a vending machine at Taito
Station. The fortune-teller is a white cat in a robe holding a staff.
He says, What do the stars have in store for you today? He says,
Please insert 500 yen. The curtains part. A pale orb under his feet
revolves like a moon. Through the slot below, a fortune is printed
on a yellow card and on one side there’s a tiny drawing of a house.
It’s like a ticket stub to a movie. A receipt. Proof of something.