

(disclaimer: i understand that an "ensayo" in spanish does not necessarily pertain to a story, however, the definition provided by the RAE does not say that an "ensayo" *can't* be a story, it merely has to reflect in prose about something, therefore i have written one. if you think that a story doesn't qualify as an "ensayo", that's valid and you don't have to count it for the competition. that being said, i put a lot of effort into this and hope you enjoy.)

cicada



Sergio Larraín. CHILE. Valparaíso. Passage Bavestrello. 1952. Fotografía.

there is a street, one amongst many streets. most of them winding, none of them named. the streets aren't drawn on any maps, no one has ever tried to. in fact, no outsiders have visited the streets in decades. they don't know how to find the streets. not that they should.

*(hi there, could you help me? i think i'm lost.)*

there are houses by the sides of the streets. all identical. two stories, no mailbox, no driveway, no front lawn, just plain grey houses. the doors are never open, the curtains are always closed. near the centre of the streets, they clump together, festering like mould in a forgotten corner. there's hardly any space between them, so close that you could reach out and touch both walls at once.

*(hi, sorry. i don't know where i'm going. can you help?)*

there are no stores, no diners, no gas stations, no buildings, no parks. there are no cars. there appear to be no people, either. there are no stairs, no traffic lights, no crosswalks, no sidewalks. there are no people here. there are no street names, no lamp posts, no colour, no sky. you can't see the sky.

where are the people?

*(hello? is anyone there? i don't know where i am.)*

three thousand and three hundred houses, all lining the sides of the streets— three hundred and twenty two of them. it's easy to get lost here, there's no one around to ask for directions. an outsider, a girl in a white summer dress and her hair in a short bob, hurries somewhere. her footsteps echo in the empty houses surrounding her. she's running in the middle of the street, but she can't see anyone, can't hear anyone.

*(hello? can anyone hear me?)*

the streets do not answer. the houses do not answer. she veers off the road and steps into the narrow space between grey walls— and they close in around her, until the breath is being squeezed out of her lungs. she doesn't know where she is. it's like waking up from a bad dream and seeing your room, but something's off. nothing is quite in its place, and the colours are slightly too saturated, the silence is slightly too quiet. it's like waking up from a bad dream only to realize you never did— you're somewhere much worse.

*(hello? please? anyone?)*

the streets do not answer. there is no end to the alleyway, she finds it just stretches on and on until she can't see light on the other side, or behind her, or above her. only grey walls and silence. it's that feeling you get when you walk alone at night and pass by the space between two buildings, where the sickly yellow light from street lamps does not reach. the itching at the back of your neck to turn around and never come back.

*(anyone? help me, please.)*

the houses do not answer. but something else does. there are footsteps behind her now. where there was one girl, now there are two. they're running at the same pace, feet hitting pavement at the same time, only the footsteps have an empty quality to them now. like knocking on a hollow wall. the first girl slows down, thrown off by the way the sound echoes around her, until she's standing still, something right behind her. she doesn't hear anything, even knowing there's something there. she imagines that if the thing behind her were alive, she would feel its breath on the back of her neck.

*(hello?)*

the girl turns around, but instead of some grisly monster, or the absence of everything, she finds herself staring at her reflection. and in the same way that a child watches a horror movie— unable to tear their eyes away, even though they know they shouldn't— she stares. the other girl, the *thing*, is identical in every way, down to the freckles on her cheekbones and the one stray strand of hair.

she feels herself taking another step forward, infinitely close to the creature in front of her. it does not breathe, its chest still and unmoving, and suddenly, as the girl stares, there is pain blooming in her stomach. she stumbles backwards, her hand grasping at something protruding from her dress.

there's a knife in her stomach. how did it get there? the thing wearing her face watches her passively as she crumples to the ground, her dress stained red with her own blood. she coughs out something that she thinks is *(help)* but might just be a groan of pain and she feels more blood splatter on her face. she's dying. she can feel herself dying and she doesn't want the last thing she'll ever see to be her reflection, a cold, lifeless copy of herself.

a girl in a white summer dress and her hair in a short bob rises from her crouch over the body on the ground.

there is a street, one amongst many streets, and there is a girl walking down the middle of it. she walks and walks until she reaches a house— house number three thousand three hundred and one— opens the front door, and steps inside. the door shuts behind her, the only noise is the tumblers in the lock clicking into place.

no outsiders try to visit the streets or the houses, and those that do, don't come back.

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