

prose for instagram

scene iii - the dance studio

Scene III: The Dance Studio

I'm writing this scene from my couch in my living room. If I crane my neck to the right, I can see into my home office/studio where my silver arched full-length mirror is standing at an angle. It's by the windows, because I need natural light shining on me when I take outfit photos. Obviously.

That's where Instagram lives. In this mirror.

"Instagram!" I call out. Nothing, at first. "Do I need to go over there and say your name, like, three or seven times or turn the lights out and spin around until I'm dizzy to summon you?"

"Here I am," she answers directly into my left ear. My shoulders jump and I feel whiplash in my neck as I immediately turn to face her.

"Jesus Christ! What is wrong with you?!"

"Sorry. The way you asked that question, I thought you were in the mood to be scared."

I relax into a laugh-sigh-smile. Have I... missed...her?

[haHAha i'm going mad]

"You're kinda right. I think I was," I tell her. "Okay, ready for a field trip? I have something in mind that I think will be a fun surprise for you."



Tonight, she's wearing a maroon crewneck with cotton-candy-pink text: *like*. Her hair is tucked behind her ears to show off her oversized round dark purple acrylic earrings. Her distressed light wash jeans cut off at the perfect length above her pastel yellow tennis shoes. I'm staring at her shoes, wishing I had them because they would match my favorite sweatshirt perfectly, until my attention is brought back to her face when she jingles my car keys.

"You know I'll go anywhere with you," she smiles sweetly. I stretch my neck, stand up from the couch, and take the keys. As we head downstairs to where my car is parked outside, I ask:

"You *do* live in the mirror, right?"

"You're the writer, Audrey."

"Right. Totally. I knew that."

<3

"Something I have been struggling with lately is the idea that I am actually *never* not performing," I tell Instagram once we're on the highway. "Because even though it's been years since I was regularly on a physical stage for dance or theater, social media is a digital stage. I performed on it nearly every day last year, and now I'm spending this 'time away' preparing for a bigger performance next year."

She turns her head toward me slightly, but doesn't say anything. I turn on my blinker to pass a car in the middle lane. I continue:

"Plus, I'm always performing a different version of myself to different people based on our relationship dynamics and the setting presented in any given situation. Even now, in this writing, I'm performing a character Audrey because I could never write myself big enough to encompass everything that truly makes me me."

It's "Hometown Glory" by Adele that plays on shuffle next. I turn up the volume a little bit. Instagram closes her eyes and leans into the seat. I can see her eyelids glisten as we pass under each bright streetlamp. Her mascara is so heavy. There isn't a single crease in her forehead, no stray hair out of place. She looks so peaceful, and yet—

God, I can't believe I missed her. And there's still so much more to write.

[why do i feel like this project is really not going to end well for me?]

I shake my head to keep it from wandering down too dark of a rabbit hole as we pull up to our destination. Tucked away in a commercial business park, a steep circle drive leads to a square black awning above the front door. There are kids getting dropped off with duffel bags and water bottles and kids standing on their tiptoes looking for their parents' cars. There is a faint trace of music that is audible only when the front door swings open.

"We're here," I tell Instagram once I've parked. She opens her eyes and leans forward, taking in the scene.

"Where's here?" she asks.

"This is where I used to take musical theater and dance classes from when I was eleven to when I was fifteen," I answer. "So before I met you. Before you were even born, at least some of the time," I choke on a laugh. "I thought it would be nice to show you a place and a version of me you've never seen. I thought it would be nice to show you in this way. In here, in the pages. When it's still *just us*—"

I catch myself. I turn around in the parked car and look at you in the backseat.

[something i have been struggling with lately
is the idea
that i am actually *never*
not performing]

“Audrey? Are you okay?” Instagram reaches out to touch my right shoulder. Her hands are cold.

My breathing is slightly too fast and shallow to pass for okay. I can't unsee a specific *you* in the backseat and I really didn't think you would show up this early but I can't describe you because—

“Yeah,” I look Instagram in the eye and I know mine have hard edges and I know she's the one who is caught off guard by our opposite colors this time. Jaw clench. Again. Again. Swallow. Breathe in sharply. For my collarbone. “Yeah, let's go inside.”

15-year-old Audrey is seated at a high-top table next to the Blue Studio—named for its one blue east wall. It's an upper level contemporary class taking place on the other side of the glass right now, but she only glances over to watch every now and then. She has her laptop open. My 27-year-old self can remember sitting at this table and the open laptop and the glances at the dancers to the left, but I can't remember whether the laptop was open to homework for school or to a Word document for personal creative writing. Which means I can just pick one now. No one is fact checking me. I'm the *writer* and this is just a *story*. Remember.

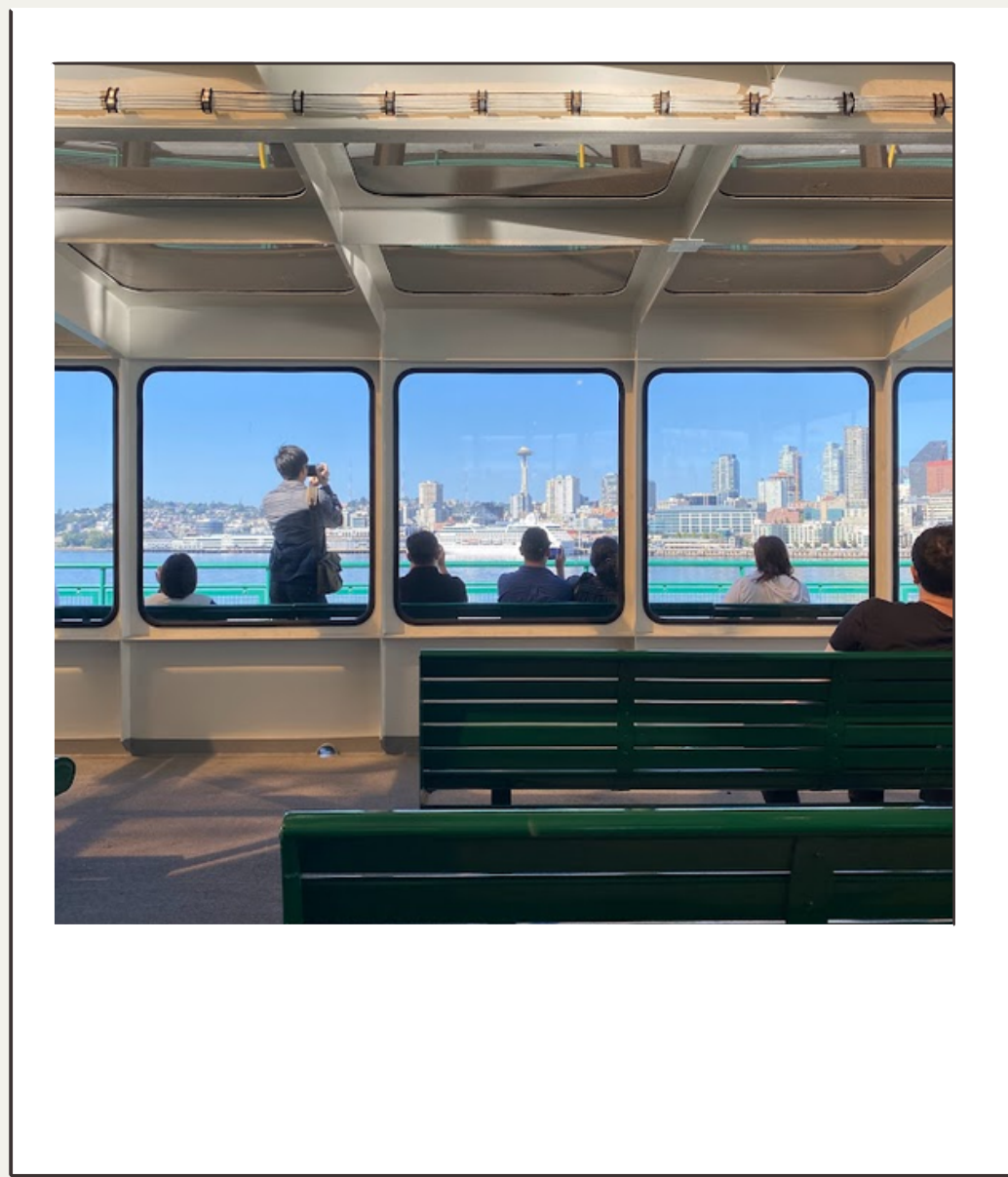
[remember]

15-year-old Audrey's hair is parted on the right and pulled back into a low bun. Hairspray and bobby pins are doing their best, but the sweat from her earlier ballet class has made the edges of her hair frizzy anyway. Her only makeup is mascara. Her black leotard with crisscross straps down the back is safety-pinned in a few extra spots near her waist. Her black sweatpants are rolled down twice at the top. Her jawline, cheekbones, and shoulder bones are prominent. She types, and I don't think it matters whether she's writing an essay for school or a script for her playwriting group. She's definitely writing. I know her. I was her. 15-year-old Audrey wouldn't have done non-creative work in her downtime at the dance studio. She *couldn't* have done it.

Instagram leaves my side to walk over to 15-year-old Audrey's table. She takes a seat directly across from her and watches her type.

I stand still. I am looking at 15-year-old Audrey and 13-year-old Instagram and I have this hilariously sick wish that I could take a picture of them together.

it's these lines from *August 19, 2023 - one day* that are running through my head right now:



one day
The boy with the black hair and
the silver rim glasses and fancy
camera will
show the pictures he is taking
of the girl with the black hair
and the tortoise sunglasses and the
cream sweater vest to her
and she will like some of them
but not others
and there will one day be a last
day they ever speak
i wonder if one day they will
ever know i took this different
kind of photo of them
how much will be revealed to us
on that one day, do you think?

I glance over my shoulder. There's nothing to see. Slowly, I make my way closer to where 15-year-old Audrey and Instagram are seated.

“So this is you before you met me,” Instagram says.

“Almost one year before...God, that makes this twelve years ago, I guess.”

“Do you know what she's writing?” Instagram asks, bringing her elbows to the table and resting her chin in her hands.

“No, I don't,” I answer truthfully. “But I do know this. The way 15-year-old Audrey is writing here is exactly the same way I write now. Our minds are tapping into the same...like we're under the same spell, the same influence...it's hard to describe, but I know it's the same.”

“You've always been an artist, Audrey.”

“Yes. And you've always been a machine.”

A few minutes of silence. Then we watch 15-year-old Audrey close her laptop, gather her bag, and move to one of the worn black leather couches. She rolls up the legs of her sweatpants to pull the feet of her ice pink tights back over her toes, and then she takes out her pointe shoes carefully. Starting on the right foot, then the left, she laces the pink satin ribbons and rolls her ankles a few times to make sure they feel secure.

The last thing she does is place her laptop in her dance bag. She stares at it for one moment longer than necessary before zipping her bag closed and heading into the Blue Studio, where the contemporary class is letting out now.

“She actually hated pointe, you know,” I tell Instagram. “Something about pointe always pushed her past her edge. She dreaded pirouettes and jumps. She really only liked bourrées across the floor with pretty arm movements. But she worked *so hard* to earn her pointe shoes. She hated to admit how much she hated dancing in them once she got them.”

“Are those the same pointe shoes you have on display in your apartment now?” Instagram asks.

“Yes. I love the *shoes*, just not the dancing in them. I love what the shoes *represent*. I love that they are *instruments of art*. And they remind me that I love so many kinds of art.”

Not long into the class, while the dancers are still warming up at the barre, we can hear the teacher’s voice echo off the thin walls, “Beautiful *expression*, Audrey, now can you rotate your leg a little further out?”

“That’s always been my consistent critique from every middle school high school college professor art mentor I’ve ever had,” I tell Instagram. “I have the heart and soul of an artist, my expression is there, my performance is full...but I’m not actually that good at the technique of dancing or drawing or playing piano or singing or acting.”

She doesn’t say anything. We watch the class for another minute. Then I continue:

“I know you’ve always been a machine...but I always thought you could be art, too, you know.”

“Maybe I’m the *instrument of art* where your technique will finally click into place,” she replies with a smile.

<3

It’s nearly 11PM now. I’ve been writing for three-and-a-half hours. At some point I moved from my couch in the living room to the desk in my home office/studio because I now find myself looking to the left and seeing my arched silver mirror at a closer angle than before.

It’s a writing night. I knew this. But I’m beginning to feel a headache and I keep thinking about how now every time I look at my arched silver mirror, I will think—Instagram’s house. Instagram lives there. I wonder if Instagram is home.

Some things are hard to unthink, you know what I mean?

I started this project because I had written these seven poems “for Instagram” but I didn’t know what I meant by writing “for Instagram.” For Instagram, as in meant to be displayed on Instagram? For Instagram, as in a gift for Instagram? Here you go, Instagram, I wrote this for you? Hope you like it? Who is Instagram, anyway? A fictional character with fashionable outfits and perfect makeup who lives in a mirror? A fictional character who is definitely capable of reading the prose I am writing for her?

But, no—

Instagram is a machine. Instagram is a stage! Instagram is a stage, and there are more than *a thousand seats* in my personal theater.

Who’s sitting front and center, I wonder?

Is it you?

Or is it you?

Or maybe it's you.

Of course, it could also be you

Or you

Or you or you or you or you or youoryouoryouoryouoryou

This project *sure will be a journey!* if I

if I get to the point of posting all of this and it's

it's like discovering I hate dancing in my pointe shoes all over again

one day I'll be satisfied with rest
and stop seeing my future life in
terms of tiktok and instagram
one day seeing the reflection of
sailboats in the harbor
so still—a perfect mirror
remember when mirrors were the
source of violins sounding sour
in my mind? one day
the water will be enough.
that day is almost today.



Twelve minutes to midnight. Four-and-a-half hours of writing now. Instagram glides into the room in pink-and-red-heart-print pajamas. She pauses as she passes my desk, lightly touches my right upper back.

“Still writing, Audrey?” she asks softly. I lean my head down and to the left but I don't look directly at her. I look at the silver mirror. I pull the hood of my pastel yellow sweatshirt down further over my forehead. She walks closer to the mirror, and then turns around again.

“Do I need to be worried? You know, about you?” she asks.

“I don’t know what good it would do. For you to worry about me,” I say to my laptop screen.

“Earlier in the car...you turned up the volume to that song by Adele. Do you want to tell me what it means to you?” At this, I squint my eyes a bit and lean back in my chair.

“Are you—*learning* me? Like, emotionally?”

“Do you not want me to?”

“I—” I sink my head into my left forearm, my left elbow. It’s past midnight. I don’t want to leave her, I know I’m going to miss her once I close my laptop, I don’t want to brush my teeth and wash my face and go to bed and face my *real full-time social media job* to-do list in the morning—

“Goodnight, Instagram.”

After a few moments, I realize my tone was too cold and I want to thank her for spending time with me and listening to me and validating my identity as an artist. I turn to the left

but it’s just the mirror now.

