

Songs of Cries

By Nanako Dobashi

I have a bomb in me
That's waiting for its beep
Trying to blow up free
And put me to sleep

The hands tick and tock
Hunt me down the steep,
Deep, darkness like hell—
If hell had no heat.

Chapter 1

Not again. No, not again! I can't breathe. I need to breathe. How do I breathe?

He gasps for air, but nothing seems to enter. His eyes absorb the remains of moisture left in his throat as they fall down his cheek and onto the floor. His throat is dry. It rasps. He grabs his throat. But that doesn't stop the coughs. *Cough. Cough. Cough. Cough. Cough.* It doesn't stop.

Clasping his mouth with his left hand, his shaking right hand desperately reaches above, grasping the edge to pull his weight. Carrying himself up straight, he manages to slide the windows open, just enough for the summer evening breeze to brush against his cheek, drying his trail of tears.

He leans on the windowsill, resting his head against the glass pane. The city buildings in the distance reflect the purple and pink painted sky. Like watercolors, the clouds swirl, soaking up the last traces of color.

Slowly, he lets himself melt onto the floor, back against the wall with the window. His white wall and white cloud couch are coated with the perfect shade of purple and pink, kissed by the last light of day. It subtly steadies his pounding heart. He closes his eyes in hopes that he could keep this canvas of calmness in his memory—before he plunges into panic again. He takes a deep breath before—like a pulse of life rushing through him—he hears a voice sing.

Alone I lay

With so much to say

When will I be heard

Without getting hurt

It's breathtaking—thats for sure—but it's not...angelic, he thinks. It sounds rather...alive.

I cry out to you

But it won't get through

So I sing instead

All the words I never said.

Her grounded voice pounds his head like a hammer in a game of Whack-A-Mole. Blood rushes to his face as he melts further on the floor, his whole body pulsing like a beating heart. The choking sensation doesn't feel like his usual anxiety attacks—it feels like someone lit a fire on his heart, the heat and flames suffocating him with its intensity. Her voice echoed in his ears, and with each breath, goosebumps formed, like waves crashing against bedrocks crawling on his skin. It was the first time he had ever felt this way—encapsulated and hypnotized by someone's presence. The sensation—the feeling of love—lingered in the air long after the sun said goodnight.

That night he slept soundly, with his windows ever so slightly open in hopes that he could hear her voice again.

Chapter 2

He studies humanity's past in university—reading stories of war and glory. A stereotypical history nerd straight out of a book—tall and boney with dark, fluffy hair and glasses. He's the type of person you find in the library, taking notes for hours and hours with a little cup of coffee with no sugar. Mainly espresso. But in his free time, he writes confusing sentences with jumbled words that somehow sound like a song—yes, a poem. He's a poet.

From a pretty early age, he found that people struggle to understand simple words. On the thirteenth page of his life, he told his parents that he was depressed. They told him that he's just being dramatic, and he just needs to try harder. That worsened his depression. Two pages later, on page fifteen, he told a girl two years older than him that he didn't want her to touch him, but she didn't listen. It left him in a state of shock and disbelief for a couple of months. Then it hit him in the form of excruciating pain in his chest every so often, making his hands shake uncontrollably and stopping his breathing. His therapist called it an anxiety attack.

His therapist said that journaling could help regulate his emotions. So he resorted to writing down his thoughts and feelings the way he felt them. They came in the form of unusual sentences, so abnormal that the very few people he shared them with called it an enigma. He liked that very much and took it as a compliment. If people didn't want to understand simple words like *no* or *I don't like that*, he was going to make himself so incomprehensible that no one would be able to take a look at his heart. Sometimes he felt that the act of writing his feelings down on paper felt exposing, but it eased his anxious mental state.

Now being on page twenty-three, he sees his friends finding their other half, someone to fill their pages full with wonder and small miracles. He feels that he wants someone like that in his life, too, someone to add more noise to his tranquil lifestyle. Recently, he's been simply scribbling these thoughts about a special someone in his poetry notebook:

Someday I hope I meet someone who
will make me want to live past page 50,
and write the rest of my story with me.

Someone I will be willing to touch
my body without being scared,
Someone I will be willing to share
my poems without being ensnared.

Someone who will meet me
with open arms, not
taken aback by my struggles
on some dark nights, I need
to feel what I feel

Someone I can hold on to
nights they need
me to shield from
their own fears, too
with open arms, I will stay
loving them until the end of time

Someday I hope
to carry a miracle of our own
created by an unbreakable
bond, they call love
I hope to drown in it
With their love, I will wish
to turn to page 100 and more.

Somehow, his wishes came out simply in words that his five-year-old cousin would be able to understand, which was a rare occurrence. A simple, yet complex wish—to find love that is accepting of his frequent anxious episodes. He thinks he's wishing for too much, and these lofty dreams won't get him anywhere. But he also thinks, *what's life without a dream? Isn't it okay to think that his suffering has somewhat ended?*

He began writing wishes about love, and lo and behold, a month later, the universe presents him a woman who, with a single breath, blows a flame of life within him.

Chapter 3

A week after he was first enchanted by her cry, he sat on his white cloud couch, legs crossed, finishing his assignments. It was a quiet summer afternoon, and his window, habitually slightly open, let the air dance a waltz with his curtains. His stomach grumbled lightly, and he turned his head just to see a cup of coffee on his side table and nothing else. He got up, walked to the kitchen, and found nothing there either. Groaning, he grabbed his wallet and keys and ran down five flights of stairs next to the broken elevator. The concrete pavement radiated heat that made the back of his knees sweat as he stumbled across the street to the bakery. Led by the sweet smell of cinnamon, he picked up the cinnamon roll and an almond croissant, shoved them in the pockets of his jorts, and scurried back across the street to his apartment.

As he treaded through the short path leading to the apartment doors, he saw a tall woman with a tan and dark, wavy hair standing before the locked ground-floor doors looking for her keys. Besides her on the floor were two heavy-looking bags of groceries. He hurried to unlock the door for her, which made her step back in surprise. She looked up and smiled. She had a dimple on her right side and a small mole on her forehead. Her dark brown eyes sparkled as they speared his. His heart skipped a beat. Her beauty was a melody, elegant and radiant.

“Thank you,” she said.

Blood rushed to his face instantly. His heart started to pound as he thought, *It's her. It's her voice that I heard, the voice I've been yearning to hear again.* He stood there like an idiot, mouth open, trying to say something, anything. He looked like a fish waiting to be fed. He knew he looked stupid in front of her, but he couldn't help it. She was unforgettable in a way that left his jaw dropping.

She gently giggled as she bent down to pick up her bags of groceries, snapping him back to sanity. He pushed hard to sound out the words, “Hey, the elevator’s broken. Let me help you with those.” She looked up at him and smiled again, and handed him her bags.

“Thank you,” she said once more. “My room’s on the fourth floor, but is that okay?”

“Of course,” he said, “I got you.”

So they walked up the stairs together. The smell of his cinnamon roll reeked from his pocket, which she caught on to and asked if it was from the bakery across the street. He replied that it was. She said that it was her favorite bakery ever, and that she recommends the lemon tarts.

“It's not too bitter, nor too sour, nor too sweet, I think it’s the most perfect mixture,” she said.

He promised her that he would try it next time. They found out that they go to the same university and that she was a third-year student studying education there.

“I think our education needs a lot of improvement, but the most I can do is teach young children to be kind,” she said. He loved that. When they reached her room, she thanked him again. He told her that he lives right above her on the fifth floor, and that she could always knock if she needed anything.

Back in his apartment, he lay down on his couch as he let the thoughts of her fill his mind. He loved the way she talked, just as much as her singing. He wished that she would keep talking to him forever. She was like a dove, a bird of hope. He wanted to ask for her number, but thought he was getting ahead of himself, especially because he’s never done such a thing before.

He picked up a pen and opened his poetry notebook, flipping through the pages. He found the one about love that he wrote a month ago and smiled. Then he flipped through a couple more and placed his pen on an empty page. He began to write.

Chapter 4

She loved the sound of pen on paper, the sound of engines being turned on, and the sound of birds taking flight. She loved the sounds of life and freedom. She longed for freedom. She was free to roam around the world, but wherever she went, her past clung onto her like shackles, chaining her to one place, one room where it all happened.

While many may have, understandably, chosen to keep silent, she hit back at the world with it—all her rage, sorrow, and bruises. Some praised her, some understood her, and some chose to turn their heads away, ears closed to reality. She didn't care. She stayed angry at the one who stained her with handprints of blood and shame. She stayed angry at the justice system meant to protect her.

She didn't care that everyone started to see an angry, emotional woman instead of one who was bruised and trying to protect herself from the feeling that her words would never reach anyone. She wasn't heard. She couldn't be heard. Humans are creatures that choose what they want to hear and ignore what is inconvenient and incomprehensible. Her experience was inconvenient because people didn't want to question someone they had put on a pedestal. He was a person of power, and it was incomprehensible to the people—how could someone so trusted do such a thing to an innocent, young girl?

It was only when she tried melodizing her thoughts and sounding them out to herself, she realized that she didn't need to force anyone to hear or to understand her. It was real to her, and she understood it, and that was all she needed. She was finally calm. She didn't want many people listening to her sing because she thought she sounded like a dying frog. But her windows were always wide open because that was how she liked them. She thought that someday, the winds would take her away and let her fly free.

Chapter 5

The lemon tart was, indeed, not too bitter, nor too sour, nor too sweet. Truth be told, he ran to the same bakery the very next day to try the lemon tarts she was talking about. He had filled up two more pages of his poetry book and was starting a third. A sweet treat with coffee was exactly what he needed to help pour out his thoughts, mainly of her, that occupied his brain all night. He clenched his teeth at the fact that she had been on his mind ever since their first encounter. *Am I a creep?* He thought to himself. *Probably.*

He sat himself on the small hammock on the balcony, crossing his legs and swaying from side to side as he tapped his pen on his chin. *Nature, nature, I should write about nature*, he thought.

In the summer breeze
The aroma of oak came
To make me sneeze

What the heck does that even mean? He groaned as he thought, *so lame*. He scribbled it out and tried again.

The woodpeckers pecked
The skin of birches
Like nails wrecked
My teacher's chalkboard

Nope. Sounds terrible. He was an atrocious poet if he tried to take random topics and write about them. Only those that came truly from his heart made any sense. He saw beauty in nature and tried to transcribe it, but it never came out as genuine and *poetic* as his poems about the noises in his brain.

He got up and walked to the balcony railing. The rusting railing scraped his shirt as he dangled his arms over the edge, his notebook and pen in hand. He stared at the mountains

painted in different shades of green, their trees gently swaying in the wind. He squinted his eyes as his hair blew into his face.

“Hey!” he heard a voice call out from below.

He flinched, almost dropping his notebook. He looked down to see her lying over the edge of the balcony, waving up at him with a bright smile. Biting his lip, he looked down and waved back.

“What are you doing?” she asks, “Are you writing something in that notebook?”

“Kind of,” he answers, shyly looking down at his notebook. “Trying to write poems, but they aren’t really good.”

“That’s so cool!” she exclaimed, and opened her mouth to ask if she could read them. But she hesitated.

“What are you up to?” he asked her.

“Just drying my laundry. The weather’s nice today,” she told him.

She started humming a familiar tune, like he had heard in childhood. He crossed his arms on the railing, placing his chin on them as he looked down at her admiringly. She wore a long, orange sundress that danced as she moved, and her dark, wavy hair bounced like the sun’s reflection on water, soft and alive. She clipped her last sock on the rack and stopped. She looked up again and asked.

“If… you don’t mind, would you let me read one of your poems? I’ve been scribbling lyrics myself—to sing.”

He stared at her blankly. *The song she was singing, she wrote the lyrics herself?* He wondered.

“Well... if you promise not to talk about them afterwards,” he said.

“Of course, I can do that,” she replied with a big smile. She looked at him with an anticipatory look, wide-eyed like she wanted him to tell her when he was available.

“I... can come down now if you’re free,” he said nervously.

She gave him two thumbs up.

“Give me five minutes!” she yelled as she ran into her apartment.

His heart felt like it was climbing up his throat. *What have I done, what have I done?* He thought to himself as he paced around the room. *Do I look alright? Do I smell alright? What poem do I even show her?* He ran to the mirror and combed his hair, wiped his glasses squeaky clean, and put on a touch of cologne. He flossed, then brushed his teeth and tongue. He was as red as a tomato. He looked down at his watch. Five minutes had passed. *I should go*, he thought, picked up his poetry notebook, and walked out the door.

Chapter 6

He stood in front of her door for three full minutes, questioning his life decisions. He crumpled a corner of his poetry notebook with his hand, sweat and nerves. He took one deep breath and reached out to the doorbell. As soon as it rang, he heard footsteps bustling toward the door, and it swung open. A whiff of lemon and vanilla emanated from her like a warm and inviting hug. She looked up at him and smiled.

“Come in, I hope it’s not too messy.”

He stepped in. Her apartment layout was the same as his, yet it felt bigger, cozier. Small lamps sat on every corner with works of art hanging around them. Her living room was filled with books. A strelitzia plant sat strong in front of the ceiling-high windows. The scent of her—of lemon and vanilla—blended with the scent of incense of aged paper, steadied his pounding heart. It felt like he was in a small book cafe, with the natural sunlight bringing life to every space it touched.

“Do you want anything to drink? I’ve got green tea and mango juice,” she asked him.

“Can I have the mango juice, please?”

“Sure. You can go ahead and sit anywhere,” she replied as she disappeared into the kitchen.

He sat on the green floor couch in front of the record player. He sank into it, like it was a chunk of playdough molding itself to his body. She came back with two glasses of mango juice and placed it on the side table as she sat down next to him. They were both extremely nervous, as they barely knew each other, but it felt like they had known each other their entire lives. They sat and stared at each other in silence for a minute, smiling like two idiots. He then lowered his gaze down to his notebook and flipped through the pages to one of the poems about love, the one about wanting to have a companion to live with past fifty.

“I think this one’s pretty simple,” he said as he passed her the notebook. She carefully took the notebook from him and started reading. He shifted uncomfortably.

“This is beautiful,” she grinned as she finished reading. “I feel the same way.”

His heart leaped at her comment. He was hesitant to show people his deeper, more emotional poems about his past, but the ones about love were bright and easy to share. He let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

She stared at his notebook, as though she was re-reading the page.

“Do you want to read another?” he blurted out.

Her eyes sparkled as she flung her head up. He nodded as he took back his notebook and turned back a couple of pages. It was one of his more vulnerable poems, but for some reason, he thought that she would understand him, that she wouldn’t be taken aback by him. He slowly offered her the notebook. She began to read.

There lived, high and mighty men,
Like Caesar and Alexander
Who fought bloody battles back then
And ruled with roaring thunder.

Who put their lives on the line,
Beings so strong and divine.
Unlike me, who only knew rhyme
Clinging onto life’s single vine.

Mother set me against others,
Like I was the Great Conqueror,
Like I held immortal powers,
Like I was the Great Protector.

I built tenacity through muscles,
To be like Thor and Hercules,
And shaped fortitude through wisdom,
To be like Plato and Socrates.

Yet it wasn't enough as I'd
Never fought a war before,
Never defeated an enemy,
Never defeated myself.

Mother set me against others,
Even when they never came near
All because I lose control
And bowed to the past I fear.

He could see her frown more and more as she read, as she occasionally glanced up at him. The cuckoo clock clicked its seconds, and the window, wide open, welcomed the whispering wind. There was a dreadfully long time of silence between them, even after it appeared that she had finished reading.

"Did you like my history references...?" he asked her cautiously.

She nodded. "Thank you for sharing this with me," she said.

He could see that she wanted to talk about the poems, but refrained from doing so as she had promised. He wanted to ask about her now, since she knew a bit more about him. He didn't know the best way to ask her; should he ask about the lyrics she was writing, or ask a broader question about the kind of music she likes?

"So... you like to sing?" he asked. He was irked at his own question and wanted to take it back.

She laughed. His shoulders relaxed.

"I do. I don't really like how I sound, so I don't sing in front of others," she whispered, "But I feel so free singing, like a bird breaking free."

He nodded. *She sounds like a manifestation of Mother Earth's voice*, he thought, but he understood how she felt—poetry felt the same for him. He told her that, and she smiled, looking relieved. They then sat deeper on the comfy couch, slouched like sloths on vacation, sipping mango juice. The afternoon passed like that—listening to her favorite records and talking about life: their favorite food, books, songs that remind them of childhood, and their ambitions for the future. They didn't touch on their past—they didn't need to—because the distance between them was safe. She did shift closer to him, though, as she complimented his cologne, and he scooted towards her too. He was mesmerized by her bright, gentle smile. He couldn't help but think, *This is how I want to spend the rest of my life.*

Chapter 7

They spent the next couple of weekends in each other's company, cooking together, watching movies, dancing to records, playing games, and reading together. He learned a couple of things about her. Her favorite food was chocolate-covered strawberries, and she disliked eggplants (nobody likes eggplants). She loved the color orange, not bright, but a little burnt like apricot. Gold shone on her, not silver, and it intensified her glow. She had a habit of singing while cooking—especially when mixing the pot—and would spill some of her songs to him.

Seven weeks had slipped by since their first meeting. The small moments of joy settled the storm in him. The attacks came less often, like a fading scar. But one evening it came again, abrupt and aggressive, right in front of her.

Neither of them felt like talking that day, so they sat on the couch, listening to her shuffled playlist, her head resting on his shoulders. Raindrops tapped on the window of his dim room, throwing off the rhythm of the slow melody.

The song stopped and the next started playing—*Iris*, by The Goo Goo Dolls. Like a bullet through glass, it pierced him, sudden and shattering. He clutched his chest as it thumped like a ticking time bomb. She jumped at the sight of this, grabbing his arm and asking if he was okay.

Concentrating his vision on the strelitzia plant, he forces the words through his mind: *you're okay, you're safe. Don't lose yourself here. Please don't scare her away.* He's had fewer and fewer of them since he met her. He didn't know why it was happening again—and why it had to happen in front of her.

He hung his head low, trying to adjust his breathing, but it didn't slow down—it raced, each breath catching on the next. His chest heaves, frantic, as his vision starts to blur. He buries his face in his hands, hoping that it'll trap the air before it slips away. The song swells in the background:

*And I don't want the world to see me
'Cause I don't think that they'd understand
When everything's meant to be broken
I just want you to know who I am.*

She leans in, slowly placing her hand on his shuddering back. He flinches and pulls away, instinctively pushing her back. He looks at her, eyes wide, as if to say, *I didn't mean to.* Cautiously, she inches toward him again, wrapping her arms around him into a hug as if he were a scared, young child. She pulls his head into her chest, burying him in her tight embrace. His breathing begins to calm, steadily syncing with hers.

*When everything feels like the movies
Yeah, you bleed just to know you're alive.*

"I'm sorry," he whispers under his breath. She shakes her head and holds him tighter. "It's okay, it's okay. I understand," she says back.

He brings his arms up to embrace her, too, and they remain there as the raindrops pound the windows harder, drowning the melancholy melody. He drifts off to sleep as the song fades to its end.

I just want you to know who I am
I just want you to know who I am
I just want you to know who I am.

Chapter 8

He forced his aching eyes open. His face felt like a deflated balloon, his eyes shriveled like dried plums. He saw her curled up next to him, breathing quietly like a mouse. She was gazing out the window. The storm had passed, and the world outside glittered with a quiet kind of peace. Realizing he was awake, she looked up at him with a frown.

“You scared me,” she said. Her eyes dropped. “But I understand... I get them too. It’s like death is constantly knocking at your door.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything. She went on to tell him about the night it all started for her—the room where it happened, the shackles that still tie her down. And then he shared his, too. They spent the rest of the day like that—slowly, piece by piece, unraveling gut-wrenching truths in the quiet room. Hand in hand, fingers intertwined, they sat.

Chapter 9

A week later, he stood outside her door, adjusting the collar of his shirt with one hand and a bouquet of sunflowers and a bag of lemon tarts in the other. He dampened the corners of the bag with his sweat yet again, slightly crumpling it. He rang the doorbell and heard footsteps clumsily running toward the door before it flung open. His nervousness flew out of his body as soon as he saw her big, bright smile.

“I’ve thought of at least fifty ways to ask you this, but it all sounds stupid. But... would you like to turn the next page with me?” he asked, trembling. At least he didn’t stutter.

She laughed. “You’re not too bitter, nor too sour, nor too sweet, just like my favorite lemon tarts,” she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He hugged her back, a firm and reassuring one, as they started their story, entrusting their hearts with one another.

The pages keep flipping
Endlessly, until we die,
But each page holds something
That makes us want to fly

Sing, write,
Draw, and narrate,
The emotions you have,
The stories you save.

Maybe we'll believe in fate,
Maybe we'll live past fifty
With company, we'll create
A perfect harmony.

The End.