

Yasmeen Khan

Katherine, or Catharsis: Nine Portraits

Grade 7

1,994 words

I.

Katherine's fingers are thin and bony like a pope buried in a Roman catacomb. She sits at the piano in the mornings before school wrapped in a black coat, her hair falling to her shoulders. She looks like a raven or a figure from Poe: stark, monochrome, and hollow. Her fingers fly into a series of manic arpeggios on the piano, frantically darting around the higher octaves and crashing into a clamor of low Cs.

Elisa meets her on the first day of ninth grade in a drafty Boston public school. They sit opposite of each other in French I, reciting months and furniture and fragments of poetry. When asked to introduce herself, Elisa does so with glee, extending her small, warm hand. "*Bonjour! Je m'appelle Elisa Aritza. La tiens?*"

Katherine takes her hand and Elisa swallows a gasp. Colder than frozen marble. "*Salut, Elisa. Je m'appelle Katherine Tanaka.*"

II.

At lunch, they avoid the messy, ringing halls of the cafeteria and seek refuge in the music room.

Katherine has been playing the piano since she was four, Elisa learns. Every blustery Saturday morning she walked with her mother to the apartment of an old Polish woman named Emilka who would teach her Mozart and make pink lemonade. The apartment, Katherine says, was always full of lilacs. Black and white photos lined the sunlit walls, like an art museum or a palace. Katherine's favorite was one of a younger Emilka, hair whipping around her like a halo, smiling and wild and unflinchingly brave.

"Eventually I surpassed her," Katherine says casually. "But we still have tea together during the spring."

Elisa tries to stay away from the topic of her own life, far more interested in Katherine's reverberating world of money and solitude. Her parents are Japanese tech giants, and as she got older the more they were away, abandoning her in her massive apartment with the books and the birds and the bile in her throat.

Katherine doesn't find out much about Elisa until four weeks into French class when the students were asked to give an oration about themselves. After Elisa's oration,

Katherine approaches her with a plethora of questions. Elisa is out of practice answering, so her replies are awkward and clipped like wings. The things she tries to say flail within her, throwing themselves against the walls of her stomach, which only makes her nauseous.

“You’re from New Jersey?” Katherine asks.

“Yeah,” says Elisa, “My parents are from Bilbao.”

“So you have been to Spain?”

“Three times, to visit family. Have you been out of the country?”

“My family owns land in Kyushu. We go every other summer. I’ve also been to Europe and South America. Amsterdam was especially wonderful.”

“Oh.”

In turn, Elisa reveals she has two older sisters. They live in a noisy red row house just outside the city where they fuss over each other and attend church every Sunday. The fact that Elisa is Catholic fascinates Katherine in a way that amuses Elisa.

“So you were baptized?”

“Yes.”

“In a river? Do they still do that?”

“Over a bowl, Katherine.”

Katherine rubs her temples. “I’m clueless, aren’t I?” It is the first time Elisa sees her smile.

III.

Katherine’s apartment is eerily clean and nowhere near the ostentatious portrait Elisa had imagined it to be. A product of new money and blue light: Elisa stares in awe. “You own the entire floor.”

“I suppose.”

Papers stacked in the study. Montblanc pens. Lemon salts in the bathroom. Porcelain dishes. A startling grand piano black and white like a swan in Tchaikovsky’s ballet. From the living room, a large window opens to a view of the city. People run across the grey streets, each caught in their own humanity like paintings at a gallery.

“Do you like art museums?” Elisa asks.

“I feel my answer will make you think I’m uncultured.”

“You’re the most cultured person I know.”

“They’re alright, I suppose. You?”

“Love them. I want to see the Met someday. Or the Louvre.”

“If we stay in French long enough, they take us on a trip to Paris.”

“Senior year?”

“The summer before.”

It is winter break in the blustery cold of Boston. Elisa curls into an armchair with a blanket. Occasionally, their conversations switch into French. Tea brews on the stove.

IV.

The seasons change and they continue with their French, crafting amusing tales about Marie and her mundane life. *Marie takes her dog to the park. Marie has three children. Marie and Lilith are friends.* In the spring, Elisa takes Katherine to her house in the suburbs and Katherine buys her a puppy named Oliver.

On the last day of school, Katherine drags Elisa into a black Mercedes. The austere Mrs. Tanaka has made a rare appearance in the front seat.

“Where are we going?” says Elisa.

“New York,” Katherine replies. “You wanted to see the Met, didn’t you?”

New York City is twitching with poets under layers of smog. Elisa wanders the Met in her fluttery blouse, hair flying loose. Katherine follows quietly, staring more at Elisa’s lips than the paintings. Rembrandt and Caravaggio, lush flowers and angelic paperboys with inky lashes. So much beauty that Elisa drowns. “Thank you.”

They pass the same exhibits over and over, Elisa clutching Katherine’s hand, holding her breath in awe. Katherine swears someone snaps a photograph of them with a cellphone. She hopes they don’t go viral.

V.

Sophomore year is a blur of cursive and candle wax. That summer, Katherine’s family is traveling to Kyushu, and for the first time in her life she doesn’t want to go. She first thinks that she has grown to appreciate the bustle of Boston more than the idyllic

green of the Japanese countryside, but this is untrue. She does not appreciate the fog on Newbury—she appreciates Elisa.

“Text me.” Elisa bites her lip.

“We don’t have an international plan.”

“Email me, then. Write me letters if you really want to be romantic.”

“Romantic? If we were a couple, you would kiss me goodbye.”

They are at the airport. Katherine’s statement sounds like an invitation, but Elisa is uncertain. Air conditioning rings in the background as a variety of people—composed businessmen, cluttered families, stressed staff—fly through the halls, unaware of each other. It is all the girls hear amidst their uncomfortable silence.

“Goodbye,” Katherine says stiffly. “I’ll see you in two months.”

“I’ll email you,” Elisa says, and she does. The emails cover a variety of topics: the weather, music, books. Elisa tries to write, with an old black ballpoint. The letter ends up being five pages long and entirely in French, with the exception of three English words at the very end. But Elisa obsesses over those words and cannot confront them, so she rips her letter in half and lets Oliver shred the rest into pieces.

VI.

Three years of stunning grades in French earns Elisa and Katherine spots on a very limited plane to France. Junior year had been a time of high heart rates and capricious moods. Elisa started wearing her father’s dark cologne to school and she cut her hair to her chin. The other kids were saying things about Elisa, wayward and jointed at the hip to a quiet, Byronic girl. If Katherine noticed, she didn’t say a thing and it killed Elisa. She wanted Katherine to notice. Notice she stopped wearing her rosary. Notice that when they were eating dinner together in a tucked away Thai restaurant, Katherine’s face hit a certain light and Elisa couldn’t see her the same way. Notice that on that flight to Paris, staring out at the clouds, Elisa was silently praying for a catharsis.

VII.

Elisa shares a hotel room with Katherine and Paris is a wonderland. She drinks coffee every morning as the sun rises over the Seine. She stares the Mona Lisa right in the

eye. She gets drunk on history at the Versailles Palace. She speaks nothing but French. She throws pillows at Katherine, mad with joy. She bursts into renditions of *Les Miserables* and laughs at random. When she lies in that queen bed with Katherine and their ankles brush, she feels so close yet so far. She talks to stray cats. She buys roses and keeps them in a plastic cup. She could die right then, watching Katherine fiddle with keys in the fuzzy light of the lamppost, and she would be satisfied.

Katherine does not return to school that fall.

VIII.

We moved to Tokyo for my parents' job, Katherine emails. *I've known for a while. But you were so happy in Paris. I'm going to miss you.*

Elisa gets a card in the mail on her birthday and an email when she graduates. They discuss university for a bit, but the emails grow shorter and shorter until at last they dwindle into nothing.

Elisa majors in French. Every word of the language pains her. She regrets not sending that letter. Her hair grows out. She sleeps with a nice boy she meets at a lecture and hates it, confirming something she's suspected for a long time. On some nights, she listens to Chopin.

She becomes a successful translator for the United Nations, negotiating between starving refugees and apathetic rulers. She moves to Geneva. Oliver dies.

IX.

Her job sends her to Paris, ten years after the trip. Elisa sits on a train, perfectly entombed, her hair like cobwebs, tracing raindrops on the windowpane. She feels she has been in this very seat ever since Katherine left her. Alone in the rain, permeating melancholy. She sits through the meeting without hearing a word of it. Afterward, she roams the streets like a ghost, a single figure in a blue coat, lost in the city of love and time. She collapses onto a bench and observes the boys passing by. She could wed a Parisian man and have kids. She can't be sad like this forever. She has to move on.

Then: a grip on her shoulder. Thin fingers. Pianist hands. And even before she hears the voice, even before she turns around, she knows. A marvelous, magical

coincidence. She can feel the cold on the back of her neck. She can hear every drop of rain hit the ground.

“Funny running into you here,” says Katherine Tanaka, in that same black coat, with that same tired smile. Elisa can’t breathe. Her Mozart, her grave musician.

Katherine eases into the bench and lights a cigarette. “How have you been?”

“Oh my god.”

“Look, I know it was sudden, and—”

Tears trickle down Elisa’s cheeks, ashen and pale. She buries her head into Katherine’s shoulder. Her prayers were answered. Catharsis in Paris. She cries, Katherine smokes, and they do not speak. Couples whisper about them. They are completely soaked.

A few minutes later, Elisa murmurs, “Marry me.”

Katherine laughs. It’s a tired laugh, and for a second Elisa thinks she might say yes. But instead, she says, “I’ve never even kissed you.”

So Elisa kisses her. Quietly. Elisa holds Katherine’s chin and treats her like glass, like she might break at any second. The kiss is cold and detached, but long. When Elisa pulls away, she asks again, “Marry me. Please. I’ll buy you a ring right now. I’ll do whatever you want.”

For a long time, Katherine says nothing. She hasn't slept properly in days. She works as a professor in Paris. She hasn’t touched a piano since she lived in Boston, all those years ago. “I can’t marry you. We cannot be happy like that.”

“Katherine—”

“The answer is no, Elisa.”

They sit together for a long time. The rain does not cease. Children in bright red jackets hurtle through the streets, laughing. A woman walks past with a black dog that looks suspiciously like Oliver. Eventually, Elisa stops crying.

“Okay,” she says, numb. “I understand.”

Then, she stands up and leaves Katherine behind.