

## **Umbra, penumbra**

She glides like a dancer across the room, this young, beautiful creature, pulling a ragged denim jacket on over the black vest with its fine line of sparkle. She is entirely careless of her loveliness, her youth, the firm smoothness of her limbs and the lustrous gloss of her hair. She frowns, searching for something, lines forming between her brows which will relax back into flawless skin the second she locates whatever is missing. Her slender fingers, topped with pink oval nails, flutter across surfaces, delve into her bag, her pockets, finally producing the object of her search – a phone, of course.

She taps at the phone, an expert interpreter of its pings and beeps, skilfully managing the barrage of messages, requests, comments and shared jokes that it yields in rapid succession. She is not only beautiful but popular too, the object of demand and desire, always forgiven for her eternal lateness because her presence never fails to brighten a room.

Soon she will leave, taking with her her sparkle and her joy, and this flurry of anticipation will swirl like snow then settle, melting back into the deep penumbra of a Thursday evening. In her profile, her gestures and her voice there are moments when I see someone else. The way her hair curls a little more on the left than the right, which she hates. A narrow waist where her jeans gape, which will annoy her for years. The angle of her jaw, the flick of her eyebrow, the slight shrug as she deftly concludes one conversation on her phone and begins another.

All of this I recognise.

How does it happen, this metamorphosis? This inexorable loss of youth and beauty, the dulling of hair, the slackening of skin, the thickening of waist and hip? There is a painful desire in me to compete, to show this gorgeous creature that everything she is came from, and remains, alive in me. If I did, she would smile and agree, she would acknowledge without any guile, that I too possess a kind of beauty. She would mean it in a way I do not, leaving me ashamed of my need to compare, my impulse to value things that are ephemeral rather than constant.

Lights glow at the front door as her lift arrives. She pockets her phone, pushes her hair back, turns her radiant smile on me. She is a star, moving across the night sky to fully occlude that other person, who has already dimmed and faded. She is entirely herself, everything that once was mine now blooming in her.

“Bye mum,” she says, “love you.”

She hugs me and leaves, the door banging behind her, her life ahead of her. Brilliant light fades to deep umbra, and, left in the shadow she casts, there is no denying it.

I am eclipsed.