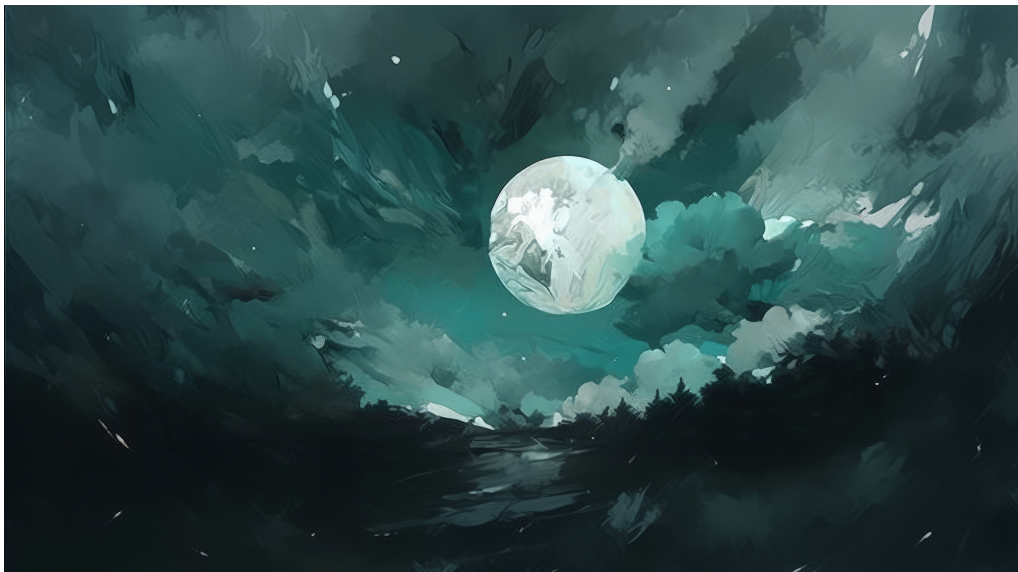


## Derelict Hearts

by Achanes Outis

— Derelict Hearts —  
Waning Veils



My fast slumber is broken by noise in the room next to me. Under or to the right, or maybe the left; don't know and don't care – it's noisy and annoying. Thumps and moans, and it's... well, it's not my home after all. What time is it? I look at the window which I forgot to close the curtains of: still night. The stars shine boldly, and the actual moon as well is no different. A waning moon, full only two nights ago, inviting still the dreamer to stay awake and bask in the sleepless shine of a lightened darkness. As well, late spring, the climate is warm enough to not be bothered in the least by stepping outside. And I think that I will take this invitation, as my neighbors are too busy losing themselves within this season's heat.

Without checking the time, I simply put on a jacket and go downstairs to the kitchen. Noises of the entrance door opening or closing are heard: must be Oudis. He never sleeps, after all.

Now that I've been here in this house enough times, spending days and nights at Pariah's and Nekri's home, I got used to knowing where... a few things are. Namely, as most importantly they would be: coffee, toilets, and the door to leap outside.

I bring them a lot of coffee, at least a tin every time I come, since they're always almost out each time, and I mean, it's the least I can do as a guest even if they say I don't need to bring anything ever. With that in mind, I don't have an issue with preparing coffee with what I purchased, although I guess it's not exactly mine since it's for the actual inhabitants of the house? Hm, we never really talked about important coffee boundaries but... well, they'll have to excuse me for being woken up by their night escapade. I'll just buy them one more tin extra next time I go shop for the place here.

Before I dose the coffee though, I should check outside, see if Oudis is sitting at the front of the house, and if he wants to share a brew.

As I open the door to the half-asleep outside, I am greeted by a gentle gust of wind, strong enough only for its presence to be noticed, as the kind caress of a moment in time... closing my eyes and taking in the air tide, I realize... now only, the uncaring gentleness is already gone and forgotten.

Opening my eyes, shaking the feeling, I look to my left and see Oudis, simply sitting on the lone stone bench near the entry steps.

*Lixi* – “Hey. Wanna share a coffee?”

*Oudis* – “Always.”

*Lixi* – “Alright. Say, before that, I'm curious... I know you don't sleep, but then, why does Nekri need sleep?”

*Oudis* – “Oh, she doesn’t. You know how close she can get to people, and especially to one soul in particular. She just prefers to spend her time with said soul, if able. Not that she necessarily dreams every night, but she definitely has the ability to do so. Wish I could sometimes, wouldn’t have to deal with...”

A pause, considering what he wants to say before saying anything. He doesn’t need to say anything, I can guess: memories of so many souls, all swirling in a vortex of turmoil and regrets.

“Well, nevermind that. So, all in all, Nekri just wants to spend time with Pariah.”

*Lixi* – “Oh they’re spending time together alright.”

*Oudis* – “They’re fucking?”

*Lixi* – “They’re fucking.”

*Oudis* – “Blame the full moon.”

*Lixi* – “Spring too?”

*Oudis* – “Sure isn’t going to help your sleep. I take it you’re not planning on sleeping at all tonight then?”

*Lixi* – “Nah, I’ll just nap sometime in the morning quickly. Had at least... some rest time. When did we all go to our rooms anyway?”

*Oudis* – “Sorry, forgot.”

*Lixi* – “Eh it’s alright. The night is certainly nice.”

*Oudis* – “It certainly is.”

We look together at the shining moon. Him, sitting down a few stairs on a stone bench, and I, standing on a cement platform leading down to a grassy path.

*Lixi* – “Alright, be right back with the coffee.”

*Oudis* – “Sure thing.”

Closing the door and going in the kitchen again, dosing the coffee... water... button. Wait. And wait. I could wait outside with Oudis but I’ll forget the coffee if I do so. Might as well think for a bit. Or not think at all. I’m not sure.

Is this a ritual? Guess it is. Wake up and go make coffee. It’s a nice way to start a

day; or a night, in this instance. I just... I don't know, it's weird. Weird to be having these sorts of things. Maybe they make life more bearable by giving anchor points throughout. A little comfort in the now, before leaving and living – thinking about the future and the past. If only... if only we could all feel alright at all times, maybe it wouldn't be aggravating.

Although, I guess I used to be that way at some point. I wonder when I was led astray from this path. Or maybe I led myself astray. It was somewhat peaceful, or maybe it wasn't that and it was another word, but I wouldn't know a word to describe this part of my life. A momentary peace was not really peace, then, I suppose. Shouldn't it last forever? I'd want peace to last forever.

Anyway... I guess coffee is ready. Get cups... sugar? Oh yeah, one cube for Oudis, one for me. Something to stir the mugs... let's get to the entrance, and let's clumsily open the door.

*Lixi* – “Hey hey, got the stuff.”

*Oudis* – “Speaking like you're dealing drugs.”

*Lixi* – “I mean, it kind of is one. Anyway, can I bother you to grab your cup before I pour it all over everywhere as I get downstairs, please?”

*Oudis* – “Of course.”

Oudis gets up and extends his arms diagonally upwards towards me. I crouch and give him the cups. The way this is all setup isn't very convenient, but then again, I'm not sure we were supposed to do that sort of thing. Or maybe we were, and it's just a way to taste a better coffee – make it a little harder to get there, so that it's tastier.

Now that my hands are free, I close the entrance, walk back the short flight of stairs, and sit down next to Oudis, and also right beside my coffee mug he put to where I would theoretically be sitting. I guess we've been living together for long enough that he's thoughtlessly thoughtful: didn't even see or hear him do it.

I grab the mug with both of my hands, warming them, and looking into the horizon. Oudis hasn't really moved his gaze from looking at nowhere, as usual.

*Lixi* – “How long has it been since we sat together like this?”

*Oudis* – “Quite a while, certainly.”

*Lixi* – “I should have been here more often with you. Sorry.”

*Oudis* – “Don’t be. You need to rest, so you shouldn’t apologize for sleeping. It would be like if you were to apologize for drinking water after not drinking any for two days.”

*Lixi* – “No way, I’d be dead after two days.”

*Oudis* – “Isn’t the limit three?”

*Lixi* – “Yeah I think, but you know how much I drink? Screw that shit, man.”

*Oudis* – “Heh, fair enough.”

We take a sip at the same time, although I quickly recoil while trying not to spill any liquid on me.

*Oudis* – “Scathing?”

*Lixi* – “Still yeah, a bit.”

*Oudis* – “I’ll wait for you then.”

*Lixi* – “Thanks. Say, what do you think about, when no one is here?”

*Oudis* – “I just... sit still and remember things from the lives that inhabit me. There’s a lot of turmoil in many souls that passed away, and simply sitting to reminisce helps them to calm down, I find.”

*Lixi* – “Have they ever been... I dunno... overbearing? On you?”

*Oudis* – “Overbearing?”

*Lixi* – “Like they kind of took over you or something. Don’t know how to put it.”

*Oudis* – “I get what you’re saying. No, never. But their voices grow louder if I don’t give them the time of day, so to say.”

*Lixi* – “Is it annoying?”

*Oudis* – “Annoying enough. I can’t really sleep, so imagine this is a bit like dreaming for me, though I’m very much awake during that time.”

*Lixi* – “And can you feel the time pass by?”

*Oudis* – “After millenniums of doing this, time flies by incredibly fast at night.”

*Lixi* – “Hm... at night? And during the day?”

*Oudis* – “Not as fast, but pretty fast. Well, I don’t remember most days once they’re done and gone, I’ll be honest with you.”

*Lixi* – “Same as I.”

*Oudis* – “How do you feel about it?”

I ponder the question for a moment. As I do, I take a sip; not too hot: now I can drink. Oudis does the same soon after.

*Lixi* – “There was a song... I liked the beginning of it, I think it describes how I feel about it perfectly.”

*Oudis* – “Oh? Lyrics?”

*Lixi* – “It’s not gonna be a perfect recall but it goes something like so: “I wish there was something between today and tomorrow, but I don’t know what I wish that would be. The days just keep running into one another.” ”

*Oudis* – “Never checked the actual lyrics for it online?”

*Lixi* – “Never took you for someone to know you could do that. I’ve never even seen you use the internet before. Also, no, never. Keep the dream alive and all that, you know?”

*Oudis* – “I get that. By the by, I don’t really use the internet. I mean, can kind of do that if needed. And considering my position as a living entity, I don’t really exist even though I do. As well, most of the souls I carry were here before any high technology things happened, so they’re not used to it, therefor I’m not used to it. ”

*Lixi* – “Hm... would that be why you stick to people?”

*Oudis* – “Yes. You also act as a guide for the present, which is rather... forlorn, I guess would be the word – to me.”

*Lixi* – “You got a bunch of sad souls in you.”

*Oudis* – “I sure do.”

We emit a small laugh, and sip our coffee under moonwarmth, with crickets singing their never-ending rhythm. Feels like an early July night, yet it’s only May.

A short minute of a comfortable silence passes by, euthanised by Oudis’ voice flowing through the wind’s veins:

*Oudis* – “Say, you got a cig?”

*Lixi* – “At this hour?”

*Oudis* – “Are you going to go sleep again?”

*Lixi* – “Fair point. I should have a pack in my coat, wait a second.”

I take a lightly crumpled pack of “News Red” cigarettes, and give a stick it to my friend with a lighter. As he lights it, I take one out for my mortality. Oudis extends back the lighter: I grab it back and slowly light my tobacco.

We inhale and exhale at the same time... mostly for effect. It’s just kind of neat to do that at the same time.

*Lixi* – “Usually when you ask for a smoke, you got something on your mind you’d like to discuss.”

*Oudis* – “I guess that’s true. Just wondering about anything that is new.”

*Lixi* – “As in...? ”

*Oudis* – “As in a newly born life, a new tool, a new project, a new piece of art, a new product, a new what-have-you. Just all these things, when you hear about them or see them at first, I guess you kind of just look at it for what it is within the present moment. Maybe you give it a little context for its origins, and a little projection for the near future.”

*Lixi* – “I would think most people simply see something for what it is in the current moment, regardless of its past or future.”

*Oudis* – “Yes, most would. We do that often as well, it’s just easy and to-the-point. And an existing thing in the present moment often does not consider its position in regards to the past and future as well, so why should we?”

*Lixi* – “What’s your thought on all of this? It’s leading somewhere, isn’t it?”

*Oudis* – “It’s just that... well considering what I may be, I see and acknowledge the past, both near and far, much more than would be normal. Even if I should be used to it after all this time – and perhaps I was for the longest time – now I take a little from Nekri, and acknowledge the future near and far much more than normal, just as well.”

I ponder for a few seconds, inhaling and exhaling smoke to emphasize the inner monologue into an external distinction.

*Lixi* – “I wonder what’s going on there. On your level, I mean – That of Manifestations; to be clear. Since Nekrichta has been losing her grip on the world and slowly disappearing, I wonder if that’s how it affects you.”

*Oudis* – “Frankly, that may be why. Ironically perhaps, as she could choose to lose her memories to keep her grip on reality, but instead she chooses to slowly lose her hope for the future. You saw and felt all of it, so you know it quite well already.”

*Lixi* – “The world’s upside down, man.”

The skeleton laughs for a moment. A laugh that is both humorous and contemplative in its cause.

*Oudis* – “And so, I’ve also been choosing to slowly remove myself from the past of the souls within me. I have been feeling... lighter. Although now, I do not recall my origins, and millennium ago... forever gone.”

A wistful and distant tone; his head slowly drops to stare at the green ground, shined upon by a clear moon.

His sadness is infectious, and I do not want to stand idly by his side this time. We both are not used to me reacting this way but...

Placing a hand upon his back, I simply caress it, with lightened up and down motions.

One can feel the bumps of his spine, but the fabric of his robe softens what should have been a rugged ambulation.

His reaction is subtle: Oudis relaxes slowly, without saying a word.

*Lixi* – “When you look... when you look at a newborn, what do you think?”

*Oudis* – “Questioning first if it will survive into its childhood, then if it will survive that, then if tragedy will not strike it before adulthood, and then what path will it take until its death. How many crossroads would a vessel to suffering take? All for the



sake of survival drives disguised as 'better tomorrows', without knowing what such qualitative adjectives mean. It's more or less the same story for every soul, after all. Humans have the capacity to sublime states into moments that now are simply a form of permanence."

*Lixi* – "Kind of want to make a rhyme out of this..."

*Oudis* – "Go ahead."

*Lixi* – "A form of permanence as penance."

*Oudis* – "That's a nice one."

*Lixi* – "Thanks. Tailored expressly just for you."

*Oudis* – "That is appreciated."

Perhaps I could just now make out a tone of thankfulness, but my thoughts are a little too occupied by trying to conceive of what he's going through. The sudden rhyme was here as well for me, to try to put some sort of a something – anything really – into starting an understanding of his thinking.

A moment passes by, as we drink our night coffee for a sleepless night, as my hand now rests on his shoulder. Thoughts pass through our heads, and the mellow night shines somberly in front of our faces. Eventually, near the end of our drink, I speak:

*Lixi* – "It's been about two weeks now since I quit my work at the crematorium. I'm not really sure what has been going on, but I realize the stillness of our situation. I thought doing this would maybe help me understand better what you and Nekri are going through; you especially. But I... how do I put this..."

*Oudis* – "Take your time. We've been doing a lot of that already, after all."

*Lixi* – "Earlier today... and many days across the year, for that matter – I catch myself staring somewhere nowhere, letting my eyes wander off, as I let my pupils close down. I lose myself first in a daydream that I did not anticipate, and climb back up from another that I fell into by accident... an accident I let happen, one that is always difficult to wake up from. And I wonder, a foot in each realms of consciousness... why should I be here or there? What is clear, I count my fingers both inside and outside dreams, and here we are, as I am. And I am real."

*Oudis* – "For your sake, I told you quitting your job wasn't going to be great for

your mental health. Especially if you keep being around us. In a way I'm happy that you did, but in another, I am deeply concerned about your well-being. Of course it was your choice. Perhaps I ought to hope for you to not regret what you left behind."

*Lixi* – "Do not worry about it. It was going to happen eventually. I'll just move on sooner than later, is all. I never wanted to be married to work. I think I cared... maybe too much."

*Oudis* – "Why?"

*Lixi* – "Just too much on my mind at most times. At some point I did not want it to be that way, but I felt like I had a duty to my peers and fellows. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't betray them."

*Oudis* – "Betraying is a big word. You didn't quit suddenly. Gave your notice way in advance and little by little made sure the transition would be the best it could be. I recall your colleagues were very understanding. Do you not remember?"

*Lixi* – "Of course I do... but you know how silly guilt can be. Even if it has no place, it still appears. It will take time for it to go away, even if I justify it all perfectly well to myself. Anyway, that is that. Didn't really want to talk much about work, we should go back to what we were on about."

*Oudis* – "If you want. I don't think talking about existential matters will resolve or advance anything."

*Lixi* – "Probably not. I guess I'd just like to understand you more."

*Oudis* – "Why?"

*Lixi* – "Because you're my friend?"

*Oudis* – "I appreciate you, Lixi, but you really... I don't know if you should question things too much. Again, it's not great for your well-being."

*Lixi* – "Probably not. But if I can't understand deeply why you're doing this, I can't help you with honesty. And between you and me... Pariah and Nekri may not want to."

*Oudis* – "I know. But they're also my friends, or rather now, our friends. I need to say that I didn't expect you to sacrifice what you have just to be here, trying to help."

*Lixi* – “I wasn’t going to but... well.”

*Oudis* – “Looking for something to pursue?”

*Lixi* – “Most likely. I’m also very curious.”

*Oudis* – “I know. But you still surprise me: doing all this is not something many would do. It’s a painful road to take, and at the end of it, the peak of your hill will be inert, and all around it will be a desert.”

*Lixi* – “Hm.”

A hum of consideration for what he said. I do not know if I should keep doing this; at least the way I am. Trying to understand this mass of souls crying out in anguish by merely walking. I suppose he’s right in warning me.

What I’m surprised about, however, is that I was not able to see his inner turmoil until recently. I’m not entirely sure what made him comfortable enough to share all of this with me in the first place. He said things, sure. Things I already forgot, of course... but there had to be more to it. He still acts as he usually does, albeit now he seems to be more often staring nowhere. This whole thing becoming a reality, I guess he tries to understand it himself.

*Lixi* – “How long has it been?”

*Oudis* – “How long has what been?”

*Lixi* – “You, wanting to die.”

*Oudis* – “Am I not already dead?”

*Lixi* – “Oudis, by now we know each other enough... your appearance is just that: an appearance. As far as I know, you and I are both very much alive.”

*Oudis* – “Then, it’s been long. Long enough that I can’t remember when, and long enough that I don’t really care. When you live, you’re only accustomed to living. But it gets tiring eventually, and you just want to rest eternally, more into eternity than you’ve been living in its mortality. Or disappear; I don’t know which is which. I will tell you this: All Manifestations deal with this fake immortality however they can. For Nekri, she simply loves a human as much as she can allow herself to. She knows that whichever human she chooses will die, and it will hurt. Hurt so much that she will not be able to talk for many a month. But she knows she is as much a prisoner to time as you and I are, and that her open wounds will eventually become another scar.

Personally, I do not know why she subjects herself to this kind of suffering, but I suppose that the beauty she finds in-between is what gives her hope to keep on doing this. And I can't really blame her either. She's a radiant individual, and she chooses radiance to light her long life, despite the spots of darkness she has to endure between crossing luminous streams."

*Lixi* – "And you? What do you choose?"

*Oudis* – "The souls within me keep company. I look after Nekrichta during moments where she is most vulnerable, so that she doesn't become too destructive... or self-destructive. She can't die like I cannot die, but it doesn't stop her from trying. So I make sure she just doesn't hurt herself too much, since ultimately, I can't stop her from hurting herself. Ah, but anyway, she's doing quite well since meeting Paragoria, so I'm not worrying too much for her at the moment."

*Lixi* – "So you choose to be friend and family both."

*Oudis* – "I suppose so. It puts emptiness at bay."

*Lixi* – "Does it though? You're lying, Oudis. The mere fact that you put in motion this plan of yours... it's enough."

*Oudis* – "Not lying. I haven't given myself entirely to emptiness, else I would be like another Manifestation... and I'm not interested in being like this one. I'd rather wonder and care at least a little, rather than wonder and wander until all is gone."

*Lixi* – "I see. If I may, what is that Manifestation's name?"

*Oudis* – "The name... it was a very long time ago since last I saw it. I remember its representation, however. Is that fine?"

*Lixi* – "Sure. For you and Nekri anyway, the name is... not the primary focus. Should it be?"

*Oudis* – "No, you're right. Anyway, that one is the Manifestation of Mayflies – or Consciousness, if you prefer."

*Lixi* – "Mayflies?"

*Oudis* – "You know these butterflies, right? Those that live for less than a day and die out? Well, this Manifestation was originally personifying consciousness, but someone someday dubbed them as a personification of Mayflies, and that stuck instead."

Much like I'm memories, and Nekri is the Moon, eventually we inhabit this designation and very much become it, in appearance."

*Lixi* – "Does it have... wings?" I gesture flapping wings with my elbows tucked in.

*Oudis* – "It's been so long. I guess so long that I haven't been able to see its changes."

*Lixi* – "Hm. Can't help but wonder, do you know where this one is?"

*Oudis* – "No. Nekri might, however. Are you curious?"

*Lixi* – "Of course."

*Oudis* – "Hm. Perhaps we ought to find them. They were the one that made me start to doubt our existence in the first place."

*Lixi* – "Could put to rest my doubts about this whole... 'end of life' thing."

*Oudis* – "Mine as well."

*Lixi* – "You? Although... with what you said, I guess it makes sense now."

*Oudis* – "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you and Pariah for your help."

*Lixi* – "Maybe. But... maybe you're right as well. I'd like to know for sure, ask around more, think more on this. You said it wasn't a great idea to quit my job, but if I did not do so, I would not be able to come to terms with this whole thing – I don't think."

*Oudis* – "Just take care of yourself. If you need to go see a sea of stars by yourself or with someone more in-line with the present moment, you ought to do so. Go enjoy life a little if you can do so still, and go take a break from this whole existential thing if you need. Turn away from this encroaching dread we try to avoid day to day, the one we forget about forgetting. It's like looking behind the sun: you need to look away from time to time to not blind yourself."

*Lixi* – "Thank you, but don't worry: I'll take care of myself like I've been for years. I'm just... you know. This whole... pondering thing; it was bound to happen I think, whether or not you showed up."

*Oudis* – "Perhaps it was. Perhaps that's also why we're friends."

*Lixi* – “Perhaps.”

I take another two cigarettes from my coat, and offer him one. He takes it, and we do the same as earlier, except that this time, I light his cigarette, and give him the lighter, inviting him to light mine; which he does. This time however, instead of talking, we simply smoke in silence; where only the sound of crickets and exhales are heard, until we're done. And then we simply sit as mutes, contemplating next to each other, alone but never lonely.

The night sky moves in the stillness of the lightless emptiness, separating light spheres in inconceivable metrics, and we move alongside as if the infinite was finite. We got so used to it, the world did too, and now dawn will break as if the sun never left.