

It's always quiet here.

No one is allowed to make a sound when we're in the chapel. Our heads do not lift even slightly. The altar above cannot be profaned by our gaze, nor the air by our voices. If they could keep us from breathing in here, the stillness would be complete, but we cannot help our slight movements. We are still alive. As hard as that might be to believe at times.

It has passed the time when we recognized each other. The other girls are identical in their nightgowns and bonnets, the same subdued pink as the floor. All our faces are blank. They must be blank. No wandering gaze dares notice otherwise. ~~Not even mine.~~ Our heads do not lift even slightly.

We had names. ~~Mine was Hortensia.~~ We have forgotten them. They are not important. We are students and young ladies of the court. Were. Will be. It doesn't matter. Time has left us behind, the only reminder of its presence now making itself heard. A bell chimes once. The sound scrapes right through to our bones. We do not bleed. Or if we do, no wandering gaze dares notice otherwise.

In a flutter of skirts, we stand as one. We are one. One lady. One perfect girl. ~~Someday, I will leave.~~ One day we will graduate and return to our families. But that is too far away to matter. The line presents itself before us, unmercifully straight. Our feet move in time, soft clicks on the floor. Our heads do not lift even slightly.

Goodnight, Headmistress. We do not meet her gaze as we pass her, stopping before our rooms. She is proud of us today. ~~I hear her commending the nurses.~~ We have not stepped out of line. Our heads do not lift even slightly. We open the doors as one.

Headmistress starts the song goodnight. Our voice is not so fine as hers, but she is proud of us. We will graduate as good young ladies. Darkness falls in an instant, hundreds of hands

putting out the light in identical rooms. We have memorized our furniture even in the darkness. We walk past the small hamper with our folded day clothes. The shelf next to our beds has the same five books, a picture of Headmistress, a small nesting doll with a knowing smile. In a flutter of sheets, we climb into bed as one. ~~I will not remember my dreams when I wake.~~