

## Interlude From Another Reality: Upside-Down

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## Interlude From Another Reality: Upside-Down

by [Sixteenthdays](#)

### Summary

He counts backwards from five hundred by threes until he can think again, and then says, “Missing, you’ve said. Not dead. So-”

He catches a glimpse of his own reflection, pale, flipped, imprecise. And behind it, a silhouette, three-dimensional, blocky lines that meet at angles, hanging down from streets and foundations like squared-off greyscale icicles, doors and alleys at impossible angles, a cityscape upside-down.

(In which Grian searches for Pearl, Mumbo searches for Grian, and they both find what they're looking for. Maybe.)

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

I see it everywhere now. In every mirror.

Reflected back at him in shop windows, in spoons, in puddles, in his eyes, that angled, upside-down reflection of familiar reality, devoid of all life but the lepidoptera.

Sometimes, a thin, clawed hand reaches out for me, from the mirrors. It’s attached to a wing, or a grin.

It's hungry. I don't recognize it, even though I do.

Maybe he wished he doesn't recognize it. Maybe he doesn't want to recognize the parts that are recognizable. Maybe he wants to stop recognizing them. Maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe

infinite city streets no exits infinite city streets, no exits

Despite everything, because of everything, Mumbo can't bring himself to leave London. He sits in his flat at a kitchen counter dusted with shed scales, faintly orange, faintly white, and he moves the oranges back and forth, and he checks his web alerts and he checks his texts and he checks his usual locations, wandering deliriously through the streets at whatever hour impulse takes him.

He knows it's pointless. He knows where they are. He knows that when he turns around there will be-

He knows that on the other side of the mirror, of the window of the shiny clean linoleum, there is an endless city where the streets twist in on themselves and the buildings hang down from the sky, where moths fly, and butterflies, and in their hands they weave the net.

He knows that when he turns around there will be-

You know it's pointless. You will did it anyway.

You know that when you turn around there will be-

-there will be a thin clawed hand reaching through Mumbo's window through his mirror through his floor through my counter through my teeth

It grabs your wrist (from that impossible) angle), and the little gripping claw at the tip digs into my skin, and

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s  
l  
l  
u  
p

*amiss in alignment he ' [s /f]lipping through/  
Kitchen linoleum spotless and bl.ue(?orange)(white)/  
And under your feet/  
dull and twisting concrete/  
And the hungry grinning outline of a person he knew that he knew that he lost that  
he knew*

And he

(.was [lost] myself.)

"I- no, no, sorry. I did hear you. The call hasn't... sorry. I think I need a moment," Mumbo says into the phone. His head hurts. So does his chest.

He counts backwards from five hundred by threes until he can think again, and then says, "Missing, you've said. Not dead. So-"

And then he stops, because there's a dial tone in his ear, ringing like the low whine of an emergency siren. Either the call has dropped or the voice on the other end had lost patience and hung up while he was hyperventilating. Probably the latter. He doesn't really blame them.

For the best, maybe. He needs to sit down, and so he does, right on the floor where he's standing. Maybe it's more of a collapse. Not like there's anyone here to argue semantics with him. His best friend is missing. He thinks he's allowed a collapse or two.

"Alright," he says to himself, eventually. "Alright. If I was a Grian, and I was missing under mysterious circumstances, where would I be?"

*You should come visit sometime!* Grian (not Grian) says, all grinning teeth, no visible mouth.  
*We're always barging in on you, it's only right.*

No one is making you, Mumbo can('t)/does(n't) think/say. You could just leave me alone. Go away.

You blink and you're seated in armchairs on the wall, drinking tea. You blink and you're on the ceiling you blink and Pearl is (not) where Grian was (not!!) you blink and the tea leaves at the bottom of your cup look like butterflies.

*Aw, we're just livening the place up!* the moth that sounds like Pearl says. Her wings drape like curtains, whitening out the walls/ceilings/floors(?). In the swooping edges of them are roads twisting inside out buildings hanging upside down wallpaper

*Really, Mumbo, you could stand to redecorate,* the butterfly that doesn't even look that much like Grian at all says. *We could help you out!*

I think I'm good, Mumbo says[? he can't feel his mouth moving], and takes another sip of tea. Can I have Grian back?

The butterfly laughs Grian's laugh, backwards and choppy, and refills your tea, and doesn't answer.

It's much harder to look for someone, Mumbo finds, when you spend all your time looking down.

Gray concrete blurs away beneath him for mile after mile. He's walked miles by now, he knows it. He's paced the distance between his own flat and Grian's too many times now. The sky has gotten so dim now, and he doesn't know how many times he's lost count of the lines between the sidewalk squares.

Maybe it's just the rainclouds that're to blame. It's been raining for what must be hours now. Foot-wide puddles fill up the boundaries between things, smoothing them out into flat mirror surfaces, gleaming back the blinding white edges of the clouds, and it's like they steal the light right out of the sky with the ripple of every new raindrop.

Mumbo did not bring an umbrella.

He checks his phone. He told everyone to message or call *immediately* if they heard anything. Left

notices with the pubs that knew them, asked around to random passers-by if they'd spotted anyone wearing that ratty, faded jumper. If they'd seen anyone climbing the hill.

No sightings. No messages. No calls.

It's only been one day. Less than a day, right? He hasn't even slept yet, since he got the news. He's just been walking, and walking, and walking, and staring down into the gray and the bright gleaming white of the clouds.

...When did he get back home?

Mumbo blinks, and he's staring at the raindrops dripping onto his gleaming kitchen floor.

His cellphone, in his hand, doesn't ring.

He's not exactly scared of falling. He's never been scared of falling. He lives in a twelfth story flat and it's never bothered him once so he's not sure, really, what it is about the precipice of the balcony that's started looming like a knife in the corner of his vision but he doesn't go out there anymore.

It's not that he's scared of falling he thinks it's that he's scared that someday he will put his foot down somewhere there is nowhere to stand

it's that he can't trust his eyes to tell him what is stable he can't trust his footing to stay where it should be he can't *trust-*

He watches his feet. Watches his footing. The ground isn't stable isn't solid isn't safe because at any given moment it could be the wall could be the ceiling could be open air.

He doesn't go outside his flat much anymore.

-isn't is is not upright his my feet are on the pavement of a city facing down, buildings all reflective steel and glass and painted ceramic in orange and milk

He is in the middle of the street, no cars incoming, just lepidoptera, fluttering in their optical illusion colors, and the street loops in front of him, twisting around itself like a ribbon, infinite, some kind of endlessly complicated Möbius strip, or maybe it's just straight and flat and ends in a house in an office building in a park why does it matter there's no cars anyway, just butterflies, they can fly wherever they like.

He looks up (down) and sees sky. He looks down (up) and sees pavement, its micas shimmering in the sun, reflecting colors.

There is a butterfly coming towards him. There is

he needs to get out of here he needs to get out of here i need to leave he stumbles back-

he stumbles back (forward) (around).

And the mirror, on the other side, in his bathroom, his bathroom mirror, the mirror he [slipped/was pulled/stepped through] is only reflecting his face, and his bathroom, and the eyespots of the butterfly that followed him out.

Mumbo has always considered himself an organized guy. Chronically so, maybe. He likes things to be in their places, he likes to know where things *are*, and most of all he likes to have a *system*.

He likes to think his system is intuitive, because it is, to him. The fruit goes in the fruit bowl, the charging cables go in their bin in the office, the locks go in the box full of locks in the closet, and the first thing he does after he has people over is go through and clean up, which is a habit he only developed after he met Grian.

The man was- *is is is is- missing not dead-* messy to a *chronic* degree, and has been so far the greatest test of his system's intuitive nature. He just- *puts things down*. On accident, at least sometimes, Mumbo has to assume, because the other option is that Grian is trying to drive him mad, and Mumbo can't think about throwing him out a twelfth-story window while he's *missing*.

What kind of friend puts a *spoon* in the *knife spot*? Honestly.

Mumbo's system is good. It's functional. It keeps things organized, and it means he can find things when he's looking for them. He can walk into his flat, and know exactly where everything is. He's seen the mess Grian lives in- He doesn't know how he does it.

Everything goes in its place. It makes everything else easier. It makes everything else make *sense*.

That's what he's thinking about, as he paces back and forth, adjusting the color-coded arrangement of the oranges and apples and pomegranates in the fruit bowl, of the clothes in his closet, of the locks in their box.

He checks his web alerts. No results.

Maybe he'll reorganize his bookshelf next. Grian always said he should try reverse alphabetical order.

The puddles of water along the sidewalk left over from the rain put him on edge, uneasy, vague shapes flickering in the corners of the reflections. Mirrors mirrors everywhere and not a drop to drink. He skirts wide around them, skips the cracks on the sidewalk just in case.

Orange blazes across the sky with the sunset. What time is it, again? Is it late? Or early? Sunrise?

He glances down to check his watch, forgets to watch his feet,

And Mumbo -

He feels the lurch in his gut first.

It's not *unfamiliar*. He's gotten used to it, that sudden jolting feeling like the room's been twisted upside-down for a moment. It comes with the butterflies- well, the actual creatures. Moths and butterflies, milky greens and optical illusion orange. Not the sensation. That's different. Probably.

He doesn't see any butterflies (yet) [he doesn't know when they became inevitable]. He holds his breath, and waits

one second, two seconds, three, four, fifteen

for the world to right itself. The front of the refrigerator is a dull silvery mirror across from where  
he isn't

plummeting/falling to the ground/hitting the ceiling.

He gasps for air. The world stays twisted, that horrible sense of *i-should-be-falling* crawling up from his stomach to his throat. The oranges, he notes blankly, aren't falling out of their bowl.

That moment, coughing, suspended on solid ground, is when he spots the first antenna.

It filters, whip-thin and weighted like a penstroke, from the dull reflective metal of the refrigerator door, drawing a line across it at an odd angle and then ripping away, just slightly, into open air. It's followed by another, and then flat orange wings painted with false eyes in blacks and blues and whites linoprinted onto the door, pulling themselves off the door piece by piece like thin paper, like ink *removed* from paper, like the two-dimensional outline of a butterfly fluttering to life.

It's big, unlike the butterflies he's seen so far. Smaller than he is, although he can't put exact dimensions to it, but much bigger than a butterfly should be. Two-dimensional, but textured. Scaled. It came out of the refrigerator.

It flutters, and changes angle slightly, and with that change in angle he's looking at a [person]. Short, brownish hair, burnt orange jumper, peering in his direction with an alien expression of Fascination/Hunger/Anticipation

It's overlaid in illusory wings, patterned hypnotically, it grins at him, there are antennae on its head there are false unseeing eyes spotted across its form its arms are thin and fragile. It looks familiar. It looks familiar. It looks familiar. Why does it look familiar *what does it look like*

He blinks eyespots out of his eyes. Lenticular printing, not linoprinting. My bad.

The butterfly grins. It says, *Pearl, come check this out!* and its voice is familiar, too, in the moment before it fades away like a sound in a yawning canyon.

*Coming!* says another voice, faint, and the world lurches again, except nothing moves, and Mumbo is right-?side?-up?, and the butterfly is facing his direction, and a moth pulls itself out of the shiny-clean linoleum floor, fluffy antennae like feather dusters, vast green wings that fill the far wall, curlicues, three-dimensional, two-dimensional, hanging from the floor, upside-down.

Mumbo squeaks, probably.

The butterfly says, from an angle where he can't see its human face, *Told you this would be fun. Mumbo, it's been ages!*

Mumbo has web alerts set up for everything he can think of. Grian's name, Pearl's name now too, she's missing too, their addresses their appearances, their likes and loves and favorite places, (butterflies with spots, feathery white-green moths), their jobs their areas, their hobbies their friends himself anything and everything.

He checks them daily, hourly, staring at his phone or his monitor with a frenzied sort of blankness until he starts to see his own reflection, and then looking away, shutting off the screen, and pacing back and forth across the kitchen linoleum.

He picks up an orange. He puts it back down, a millimeter to the side. He powers his monitor back

on, and checks again.

There's never anything new.

He checks again.

Mumbo grips the edge of his counter with one hand. The other grips tighter onto the phone receiver- both actions subconscious, as stress forces the pitch of his voice higher and higher.

"Would you please just *listen* to me? I *know* what it s-"

He shuts up. There's noise on the other end of the phone. It sounds concerned.

"I am not- I am *not imagining* it, won't you just- I didn't call, alright?"

A brief pause. Mumbo takes a breath, forehead pinching together. The voice on the other end sounds upset.

"No! It, it won't help me find them, I am not *grieving*, okay? They're not *gone*, I-"

He stops again and this time, the silence settles down like something fresh fallen. Like snow, like bright fall leaves, about to be whirled up again by the wind.

"I know they're not. I *saw* them. I saw them, Iskall... I saw them. I just don't... know..."

His voice trails off.

*Where?*

*There!* There's something in the corner of his eye. A glint of light off the window. No, a butterfly-wing.

He catches a glimpse of his own reflection, pale, flipped, imprecise. And behind it, a silhouette, three-dimensional, blocky lines that meet at angles, hanging down from streets and foundations like squared-off greyscale icicles, doors and alleys at impossible angles, a cityscape upside-down.

It takes up the entire upper half of the window, and below it, sky. Something jolts in his chest. Maybe he's the one upside-down maybe he's not. The oranges are still in their bowl.

There's nothing behind it, the upside-down city in his window. He can't see the real London behind it, or at all. There's only the upside-down, reaching downwards, impossible.

He looks away, heart in his throat. The call's gone dead in his ear. He's leaning on the counter, in his kitchen, and he has *nothing to fear from a window*.

He looks back, and sure enough the city is gone.

Mumbo could have sworn he'd closed the kitchen window.

He doesn't like to leave it open. *Anything* could get in. Like fruit flies. Or burglars. Or Grians, which were- which are basically the same thing as fruit flies and burglars.

And yet, despite this, there is a swarm of butterfliesmoths *lepidoptera* in his kitchen, circling, flipping dancing hypnotizing they are on the ceiling (he?) is on the ceiling no he is on the floor he is on the floor he is on the floor he is *not upside-down he is on the floor*

he is on the floor. there are butterflies and moths, whirling, unfolding, wings beating a storm, throwing his proprioception into confusion, colors and colors and

They flow out through the window. Mumbo's heartbeat slows.

The window is closed.

Mumbo reorganizes the oranges. Mumbo reorganizes the oranges. Mumbo mops the linoleum and reorganizes the oranges and locks the doors and

Grian's house is full of butterflies.

Grian's house is full of butterflies and empty of life, matte powdery wings gently waving from every surface. There are no chairs or tables. There are butterflies and butterflies and  $\eta\mu\alpha\mu\lambda\iota\sigma$  -

The chairs and tables clutter the ceilings, and the floors are carpeted with nothing but butterflies.

There's a grocery list pinned to the refrigerator where it's suspended against the wall, and scribbled across the bottom is a quick *be back soon*, all the letters inverted.

and the silence is loud with the cacophonous ruffling of butterflies' wings, and everything is

u p s i d e p o m u

- there are no chairs or tables. All the chairs and tables are [*amiss*] on the ceiling -

and the mirror in the bathroom, inverse, ripples as though something [*is pulling*] has just

gone

through

## End Notes

grian is a peacock butterfly (*aglais io*) and pearl is a luna moth (*actias luna*). *lepidoptera* is the order of animals that includes both butterflies and moths.

this fic was of course partly written by my dear cowriter zeph, and i guess my detested nemesis cal contributed a couple things too, unfortunately.

:)

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