There are two doors, to begin with. Upon examination, both are inherently opposing. They are set into the same wall, of the same size, in the same vicinity and, ultimately, of the same universe. And still, despite such conspicuous similarities, my hand wavers over each doorknob in turn. My eyes, though perfectly capable of discerning such parallelism between these consecutive gateways, seem only to recognise a tangible sense to enter the one on the right.

Its surface is an achromatic white, embellished with elaborate carvings of wrens, sparrows and snakes, an odd discrepancy between the tale of such diverging creatures. Vines and delicate petunias meander through the painted walnut and separate at an estuary, where a cast iron grille guards a vantage point. Though one may think this provides an insight as to what the door conceals, no matter how many times I rise to my greatest height and peer through the gaps, there is simply nothing beyond that window besides an impregnable force that repels me once more – it can only be described as a paradox far more complex than one I am able to comprehend: its existence appears frivolous to me. I trace my touch along the unblemished face of this corner of the multiverse and admire the verdant ornamentation at my fingertips, following its path to the handle before me. It is in the shape of a serpent and, beneath it, a lock is set into the door, though it is inexplicably rusted with age and decaying laboriously as I watch in rumination. Its according key, on the contrary, has somehow been spared from the effects time fosters, and is smooth in my right palm. In my distant memory, there was once a time it fit the keyhole, but, as the lock denatured, the key became an unsuitable substrate; for some time, this is the way it has been.

I draw back my extended arm from the snake’s beckoning grasp and reach towards the other door with my left hand, producing yet another key grasped between my fingers. Framed by coiling knotweed, this door is raw, its timber – unlike the door to the right – untouched by an abundance of an artificial substance such as paint, leaving it a warm russet colour. Subsequently, however, its surface is splintered with the absence of lacquer, scathing the Ulysses and monarch butterflies fluttering over the face before me and, in my mind’s eye, hindering the phenomenon of flight. Such magnificent beings should be animated with the inks and pigments of life but, as it is for the wood, a lack of varnish has led to disheartening ramifications, and the colour of the admirals’ wings seems to fade indefinitely. With a slither of empathy in my approach, I brush their bodies bearing resemblance to stained glass in hopes my touch may lift them higher, enabling the reflection of wonders if it were possible again someday. Thus, I proffer the gleaming length of brass in my hold and fruitlessly endeavour to insert it into this door’s entrance, the handle engraved with a pattern likened to the wings of butterflies and the lock, as the other, equally infested by corrosion. Just as is the case for the pathway I could not cross on my right, this door no longer permits my entry as it once did.

I begin to grow agitated, overcome with confusion and frustrated with the alienation I suffer at the hands of both worlds. Stepping away from the left-most door, I drop both keys to the concrete floor I stand on and allow them to clatter against it, drawing my arms around me in attempts to comfort my lonesome self – or maybe, to isolate myself further, in fear of repeated, ensuing rejection. And isolate myself I do, providing the snakes and vines wrapped around my forearms opportunity to travel further around my body, baring their fangs at the flightless butterflies resting on my shoulders, as wrens dive in to snatch my lovely admirals up in their beaks. The sparrows attempting to escape from my head in a panic are struck by splinters of timber, crying out in anguish, and convulsing grotesquely. The posies of petunias tucked behind my ears wither and wilt, losing their petals as knotweed approaches them from the rim of the left door.

As if responding to the shift in atmosphere and my erratic breathing, the doors that continue to deny me warp impossibly before my eyes, taunting and trivialising my struggle and, even now, emphasising with their overbearing voices the irrefutable fact that I am not welcomed by their interiors. As I become enveloped in restraints and pierced by thorns of wood, I consider the words of the doors. Though I possess features and characteristics of both, some undeniably pulchritudinous and others flawed, any beauty found within each separate universe disintegrate upon collision – a collision which I undoubtedly embody. For that reason, I could not hope to seek refuge in two opposing realms that engage in battle upon meeting, tearing each apart. With that thought in mind, I succumb to their conflict.

That is, until I catch sight of the keys at my feet.

I notice something I never have before: the keys, which differ in shape, seem able to mould together like two puzzle pieces from the angle at which I currently view them, each nook and twist in one’s brass constitutions perfectly parallel with those of the other. At first, consumed by an absolute despair, I simply stare with blinking eyes, then reconsider my willingness to submit. Though not without considerable difficulty given my position, I slowly and hesitantly lower myself to the ground and stretch out my fingers, attempting to pull the keys towards me and bring them into my grasp. The moment I drag them close enough, I hasten to connect the keys accordingly with what little control remains in my possession, noting the *click* resounding in the depths of my own conscious, and the door that wavers in and out of visibility between the two distorting ones I had previously tried to open. This one has no consistent or perceivable decoration as the others did, nor does it appear to have a single colour I can discern with my human eyes. I can only recognise the strong desire to reveal its interior, whereas the others eventually repelled me, and an innate sense of belonging and elation. As I crawl arduously towards this newly appeared gateway, the splinters planted into my flesh and the hindrances on my movement seem to loosen with my newfound effort. Approaching this door, now on my knees, I lift both of my shaking hands with which I hold the merged key towards its lock, the single solid feature of the door I manage to apprehend. It is new, not rusted, gleaming despite the terrifying situation I find myself in, as if wearing a radiant smile that induces my interest – it is not manipulative. With a gesture of finality, I promptly slot the key in, involuntarily restricting my own breathing as I wait to witness the results. Under my fingers, I feel the key slide in with ease and waste no time in turning it in its place, savouring the sound of access I had long forgotten.

I open the door, and light pours onto this junction I have been detained in.

Instantly, my shackles of vines and snakes fall from my body and turn to dust the moment they hit the floor. As the wrens that hunt them follow suit, the butterflies on my shoulders take to the air, beating wings of prismatic vividness and disappearing into the luminescence along with the fallen sparrows. They sing a different tune to their usual laments as they rise and follow. The lost petunia petals give way to instantaneous bloom where they rest on the ground, rebirthed into new lushness by a miracle, the ones still clinging to my ears coming back to life simultaneously as the knotweed retreats. In accordance, the splinters and thorns embedded in my limbs disintegrate along with the agony they have caused me, and it no longer pains me to move. On either side of me, the two contorting doors cease their insults and come to rest in serenity.

The key sits in my palm, glinting almost with provocation as I observe it in wonder. Then, without warning, it bursts into a shower of coppery specks and rests on a coming breeze. As the key’s remnants are carried away by the wind, I extend a desperate hand towards those particles, then withdraw my reach and settle with a countenance of contentment.

“I see,” I speak with a peaceful smile, advancing towards the door with certainty in my step. I cross the threshold and welcome the light on my face, before retreating into the glow I have craved for as long as time has nourished this war. “The answer has always been right there”. As I disappear into the light and awaiting prosperity, the door does not shut behind me, unleashing its light and providing entry for those who wish to follow after.