

Four Chances

The sun was setting to my left as my legs dangled off of a cliff—in the five hours that I'd been sitting, losing myself in the flickering lights of the city, I hadn't looked down, not once. A draft brushed past my neck; I didn't flinch. I felt a bug crawl across my finger, then the warmth in my palm as my hands sank slowly into the dirt. I thought about how serene it would be to decay, or to grow, here in this space. To deconstruct into the destruction of the atmosphere around me, then blossom into the atoms giving life to creatures, unknowing what it took to allow them to breathe.

I counted each and every blink. I took note of the way Pigeons glided when an Eagle was soaring above or below. Anything was better than losing myself in a field of the series of events that had taken place, against my will, as all things were, of course. I used to feel accomplished in my realization that I had no control over anything other than the physical manifestation of my body. I knew I had no control over my mind, even my thoughts, my fears, my attractions. I should've known no amount of mindless skyscraper scouring could distract me from grief—or whatever it's called when you refuse to acknowledge it.

They weren't gone; they couldn't be. I could feel their arms around me and my hair scratching my temple as I nestled my heavy head on their shoulder. I would hold my breath, timing the seconds it took for them to shift from the pain of such weight, but they never did. Each year in darkness, a blink, I could hear their voice going on and on about everything known to man. I'd listen to them recount the Trojan War on Tuesday, and by Thursday, we'd be on reincarnation. Sundays were for that, too; it was the only concept they'd talk about more than once.

An animal shifted in the thickets behind me, and I found myself wading in the forest, blood trickling down my palms as I closed my hand around the thorns sprouting out around me; one of them had to be her. The cool sting of their brass ring, come to think of it—I can't even imagine what their hand would look like without it. I never asked why, but they never took it off. I could feel it in my thighs at night, behind my ear in the morning, laced and intertwined with my own fingers in the afternoon.

I can't bring myself even to pity the whirlwind of non-emotions swirling inside me. I feel everything at once: the proposal, the choked bawling, mortgage upstate plans, the life kicking inside me. Somehow—and nothing seems to be able to convince me why—everything, and nothing, matters in this moment. If a gust of wind were to push me forward into the muck of ten commandment ignorers below. If a deer were to give birth to a fawn in my lap, would I even give a sideways glance?

"Yes, I think so. Don't you?" I hear her utter, and I can feel myself ready to cave inside. The ochre of her vowels, the salt in her syllables, the lingual waves of her voice inflections—I could just reach out and bottle it. Worth a million, but I wouldn't dare put it up for sale.

"Yeah," I respond, but nothing comes out, as always. Lying next to her, speaking seemed to take so much strength. It felt like I was meant to simply exist: not to grow, not to waste away, but to let time pass until it no longer exists.

"All energy is borrowed," she continued, "and one day, we have to give it back. The problem is, those who are aware of this also know there's no use in screaming it from the rooftops. You'll have to give that energy back, too, someday."

I softly chuckle, registering half of what she's saying and letting the other half find a home in the back of my mind, to be pondered on with a loofah and aloe vera later.

"There's nothing you can say to convince anyone of such a thing because if they are here, breathing and living in front of you, they've still got a lesson to learn."

"And what's mine?" I let out, but it's no more taxing than a breath. I feel her shoulders rise at this, at my participation.

She paused, and during that time, I died and was gifted life four times. I spent nine days as a butterfly, 20 years as a meth addict, 67 years as a corporate giant, and 37 years as a painter. In all of these winding paths, not a single decision led me to the one, my one. Every second, every metamorphosis, I was a gaping chasm of aching. I was given four chances to move on, but I instead succumbed to the comfort of pain each time. Then, she finally responded to my inquiry, "I couldn't tell you."

With the city preparing for the long nap, crickets looking for a meadow to hop within, stars searching the sky for a continent to shoot across, philosophers turning every stone in dreams for an open mind to lay down the concept of a new leading regime, I feel every circle

align. Centers centered and paths pristinely outlined. I take in every want and each ignored need of those asleep below our shifting feet, and exhale forever.

"Well, I know—if there's some lesson for me to learn, I think it's you. Every day, you tell me about something different: a waging war, a civilization crumbling, a god who lost its touch from frolicking too long with those who worshiped him. But the one thing that's never changed is the one story with the same beginning, middle, and end. It's us. Reincarnated. Reborn. Re-loved. If I'm to learn anything, it's to take in everything you say and let it seep out of every pore on my body or in every song I may sing—it'd all be for free. Everyone, or no one, could learn from the parables of our journeys."

Then I feel her in everything: in the hum of the cicadas, in the slant of the flower stems, in the tilting of the ears of the stray cats following me home at night. I see her in the pigment of my chipping acrylic. I hear her narrating the architectural mysteries of the pyramids on the History Channel or in the perpetual static of AM channel 33.3. I taste her in the notes of rainy woodlands in Canadian maple syrup or in the blood slinking down my throat from a bitten tongue. The aroma of her in the carbon running rampant throughout the summer streets.

Alas, I release and fall forward—the wind whipping past my face, the crisp frigidity of the night watering my eyes and lashes, and years passing in fever-hot flashes. The city sinking with each meter I flail within. Brass-ringed hands reaching out in every which way, offering me a chance to land softly on the pillowed clouds of loss and pain, but I've already accepted grief. For only in choosing to let her go can we both move on, endlessly reincarnating into the forever beautiful sky—free.