



# CITY OF STARS

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POETRY

The Girl

She cried.  
Tears dripped into a jar that was sealed airtight.  
She laughed  
And it was bottled up and placed aside.  
She screamed  
And this came from her mouth.  
All she knew how to do was scream.  
This is she.

We are nothing more than ordinary.  
The words that girl once said.  
For the moon gleams on waterfalls  
With a city of stars beneath our heads.  
We are nothing more than flawed.  
A mere tragic plague.  
A dead mind and dead hopes.  
The only world she knows.

*How does it feel to be trapped in your own mind?*  
She feels fine.  
*Don't you see the walls close in?*  
"That's simply the passage of time."  
*The monster in your dreams?*  
"You mean happiness, or me?"  
*Surely you feel pain?*  
She said, "Nope, not a thing."

That was most surprising,  
The expression that she made.  
For a smile crept upon her face.  
One of pure distaste.

Her fingers touched the sunlight.  
Of that, I won't forget.  
But she felt the kiss of coldness  
And the peace that crept back in.

I'll never understand,  
Her deeply embedded pain  
With the peace she somehow gained.

A battle that she won,  
But lost all the same.

*I want my friends in the apartments*

*to ask me for meal swipes*

Do you remember the hard candy piles of *Ross in LA*?  
The museum invites you to take one of him  
before you leave, for the road which he cannot travel.  
I'm on the Hill again; I haven't flocked to the apartments yet  
but when I open my window I see your place on the skyline  
like a blanket-crease under which you're sleeping.  
I know we're in the twilight of our college years, two down,  
two to go; I know you're going back to Fresno.  
I peer Westwood's changing faces and I can't help but think  
our love is now a legend of the land, which is why  
I'm gazing a thousand yards in a line for food again,  
which is why above *Ross*, the placard said:  
"Let me be something to you! I promise, if I be nothing more,  
that like a rock, I will sit in the pit of your stomach."

## City of Stars

sunglasses, sand, bicycles, and skateboards  
the sound of the Pacific breaking onto the shore  
palm trees in the breeze and bottomless mimosas  
the signature trademarks of Southern California

classic style homes with modest-sized, dried up lawns  
the evening barks of dogs, bougainvilleas on sidewalks  
semi circle driveways, beveled glass front doors  
large oaks that curve over boulevards like forests in folklore

obnoxious cars that cut across crosswalk corners  
fast roaring times, daring lane switchovers  
freeway jams on the 10 can keep you stuck there for hours  
going anywhere can be such a displeasure

makeshift tents on the streets of downtown  
high rise apartments, thriving boba shops all around  
ice cream parlors, all you can eat barbecue at K-town  
night markets and fairs for a fun weekend out

or maybe you'll find enlightenment in health and wellness  
farm-to-table dining and vegetarian options  
hitting the gym lives rent free in most new year resolutions  
it's never too late to experiment with a new diet

kale smoothies and acai bowls  
new makeup, shopping bags from the Grove  
Starbucks matcha latte in one hand, an iPhone in the other  
it's not a secret that In and Out burgers are a guilty pleasure

here, there are wild roller coasters and rides  
world-class artists performing live  
the best of the best in tournaments and games  
clubs and raves to dance the night away

people with dreams of someday being on screen  
cocktail dresses and heels and celebrity sightings

everybody's searching for who they want to be  
each adding their own shine to the city's diversity

yes, living in a place like this would truly be a wonder  
yet also a double edged sword depending on what you can afford  
they say, the city of stars has too much smog  
you can't get around unless you have a car  
sitting right in the eye of the San Andreas Fault  
and in thirty-some years, the city will be underwater  
but underneath all its bright lights, sunshine, and glamor  
beyond the taxes, gas prices, high rates at parking meters  
at the true heart of it is its community  
the familiar grocery store clerk's smile, asking me how I'm doing  
the comfort in seeing my neighbor wave to me from the front porch  
the annual town fireworks festival booming with music and chatter  
the thump of the basketball down the street on summer evenings  
the sacred peace of generations of history in the town library  
and I can't forget the way my breath caught at the sight of the sparkling lights  
beneath me as I peered down from the window of my returning flight  
I've had so many pivotal experiences here with friends and family  
all of which have helped me grow and flourish authentically

it's not the perfect place, free of mistakes  
but it's still home to me either way  
the freedom, the color, the hope and the fervor  
there is beauty at its core, even in a city like L.A.

AUGUST DEVOTION

*(so this is love)*. a shepherd's pie in the oven on a muggy summer night. feeling forgotten in the city. back in tucson, i'd spend my days watching the goldfinches perched on a shadow-box fence, laughter-edged cries between their cheeks like children scream of romance and devotion.

i almost ran to hollywood today. i found a book of erotic poetry the last time I went and almost bought it. but it's easier to love something familiar between the margins, so i put it down and carried another morrison home instead.

it felt easier to love last august. brewing chamomile in the city light and living honest memories. there are things i wish i'd told you then, like how we are soft people. soft lovers. soft friends. but it's been 49 days, and i'm trying to forget all this.

and tear the memory from its branches. watching the leaves below me like a confession of devotion. like the birds beneath my windowsill, adrift on yellow wings.

in another life

star crossed lovers of inextricably  
intertwined fates as sure as the rise and  
fall of the burning sun

the boy was a star  
a shimmering whip of liquid mercury  
a fencer sword vying to draw first blood  
he drifted between clouds arriving only to vanish from the human eye  
a source of hope and dreams  
the air was always crisp, and it was so *very*

silent.

some days, fireworks splattered against the night canvas  
a spectacle for the stars  
most days, he just looked down upon the city of grounded stars  
one day, every year, even the stars get a wish (that comes true)  
and so, after that one sunset in mid-June  
where the sky is punctuated with miracles of color  
the boy who is a star becomes just a boy

and that's where he meets

the girl was a human  
an angel without wings, her wrapped feet gliding seamlessly across wooden floors  
a vision in pale pink and slicked back hair  
she dreamt of flying between the clouds  
and disappear from the glaring eye of grounded stars  
the air was always suffocating, and it was so *very*

loud.

everyday, she wished on a star from above  
stagnant, unwavering in the sky  
beckoning her from the endless night  
she wished she could fly amongst the stars

he relished the honking horns, agitated shouting, clatter of utensils  
filling the silent void in his soul  
the exotic smells of worldly dishes, towering buildings, blinding lights,  
"Welcome to Los Angeles," he read on every postcard  
his heart belonged here eternally.



he saw *her* at whim of seeing a ballet  
    (best decision he thought he made)  
and he saw that she belonged in the sky  
his heart was hers, and her heart was his  
their juxtaposing lives  
    inextricably intertwined

she met his eyes, and even through the stage lights  
    she could see the silvery orbs staring back at her  
    knowing all too much without a single meeting

they met after the show  
    he was bewitched by her dark waves of hair  
        lips shaped like a hanger bent perfectly  
        eyes of the most magnificent gold  
            he had never gotten to see gold before.  
    she was enchanted by his sandy hair  
        the twinkle she swore she saw in his eyes  
        the adventure and freedom of his soul  
            that she had craved for so long.

through the city of stars they lept  
    he thought about staying in noise forever  
    she thought about leaving for the silent stars in the sky  
    they both thought about how ethereal the other looked under the pale moonlight

in a world enumerated with stars

the sun began to wave its alarming rays  
    shattering the fragile moment between  
        the boy and girl  
    but after that night, neither could go back to the life they lived  
    not after they saw what world they could live in

their hearts belonged to each other  
    in *every* way

they made a pact just then  
    “trade places with me” she whispered  
    all her hurt seeping into their linked hands  
                            “please”  
    even if this wasn’t his dream  
    he would’ve traded in a heartbeat

“embrace the stars for me when you get there” he whispered  
brushing a dark strand out of her face  
“fly for me, and i’ll live for you.”

she nodded once, not one for words  
and just like that

her eyes became silver  
his eyes became hazel  
they locked one  
last  
time

they traded hearts and souls and lives  
their fates inextricably  
intertwined.

**May**

On the way home from the show  
There are people living everywhere  
Lit up empty office buildings  
    Late evening on a Tuesday.  
The whole city takes a sigh and     inhales again  
Sucks the sounds right from my lungs.  
Late spring on a Tuesday night  
    The roses  
Splattered purple glow in the moonshine.

High noon on a Wednesday  
The air so full of jasmine it  
    Twists my head around.  
Covered in sweat I     love you then  
    This early afternoon sun is  
    Kind to us  
Breeze like something from a rainstorm  
All green yellow and blue.  
Birdsong from the pine needles  
    White ribbons on gray clouds  
    On tired shoes.

Thursday evening the burning building  
Makes the city smell like a campfire.  
See the stars above the skyline  
    Brown balconies and fluorescent light  
Cuts skin like an open letter  
    Writing psalms to you.  
Smoke glistening at high tide  
Those nearly-midnight voices  
    A heart of youth and sorrow  
Breath like fire from your tongue     And  
The moon again  
    Solemn and true.

## SHORT STORIES



looking at the bigger picture

“Congratulations Mateo, you’ve got the job!” my boss exclaims, unable to contain his excitement as he presents me the big news. My company had a job opening in Los Angeles in their corporate office, which was sought after by workers all across the country. And today I found out, that very job was mine. “I’ve been told to inform you that on top of the salary raise, you will also be provided an apartment over there,” he states. I thought my smile couldn’t get bigger, but it certainly did. The salary alone is nearly double what I am currently making, and the big move is undoubtedly going to change my life.

I would’ve never guessed when I got to work today that I would be preparing to leave this office. I’ve worked here for 4 years now and I was very comfortable here. I had a solid bond with my coworkers and I knew that my boss trusted me. While leaving would be sad, I knew the promotion was an opportunity I couldn’t pass. My boss informed me that I had 3 weeks to pack up my office here in Boise, Idaho and head southwest to Los Angeles. He said he would send me the flight details that the company is providing for me to get there, and then he left me alone in my office. I looked around my small office and all the things that made it my own. The picture frames of my parents and I sitting on the desk, the little trinkets that surrounded them, and the certifications that hung on my wall. I took a deep breath and smiled, imagining the larger office that these items will soon inhabit.

I grabbed a box from the corner of my office and smiled as I started to take the certifications off the wall and place them in the box. It was a small start to getting myself ready to pack up shop. I put the 3 framed certificates in the box and then pushed it to the side to start my workday.

The following 3 weeks were filled with every emotion you could think of: excitement, fear, happiness, sadness, stress, gratitude. I spent most of my time with my friends and family, squeezing in some last memories together before I moved. I had never been away from home. I was born and raised in Boise and I had everything I needed right here. I went to grade school here, went to college here, started my first job at 16 in retail here, went through many jobs here, and then had my recent job in the office here. I had my family and friends closeby and it was a comfortable life to live. But now, at age 25, I felt like this move to Los Angeles is a turning point in my adulthood.

Today was the day I was finally leaving. My parents drove me to the airport, and they’ve been as supportive as possible throughout all of this. I was an only child, and today they were setting me free. The day was as emotional for me as it was for them. They took me to the airport and dropped me off at my terminal. There were many tears shed while I gave my goodbyes, and then I started making my journey to California.

The flight was short, and I made it through baggage claim, turning on my phone to check on my Uber reservation. I took a good look at my driver, a girl named ‘Liliana,’ and studied her face to make sure I would recognize her. I took a mental note that she was 15 minutes away, and decided to freshen up before going outside to meet her. I found a car that resembled the red car on my phone and checked the license plate just to be sure I was hopping in the right car.

I put my personal belongings down before placing my luggage in the trunk. I must have seemed eager as her next words were “So, what’s got you grinning today?” It was just what I needed, I had been sharing my excitement with my loved ones and have been itching to tell a new set of ears. Who better to tell than an Uber driver who you would likely never see again? I told her excitedly what brought me to LA, how I had never been away from home, how this was the opportunity of a

lifetime, and how I was going to be making more than I could have ever imagined. She was a great listener and even gave me advice about how to go about living in LA and what to look out for. She was kind, and I told myself that I would give her high ratings when I got home.

The ride ended as we approached a beautifully tall apartment complex. I got my keys and found my way up to my apartment. It was beautiful, modern, and furnished. I threw my stuff down as I looked around. It was a one-bedroom apartment, yet it felt spacious and welcoming. I pulled out my phone, taking pictures of everything I found interesting and sending them to everyone back home. I wanted to indulge in this new feeling with everyone, and my heart sank when I realized I really wouldn't be able to do that. When I finally felt settled into my new home, I began to unpack. After 4 hours, I was finished. I took another tour of my own apartment to see the changes I made to the space by adding my items. It put an immediate smile on my face to see the cozy space become my own.

I then decided I wanted to explore the town to get accustomed to the change. My apartment is right next to the malls and shopping districts, which makes it easier to get around until my parents are able to drive my car down here, which they're doing in two weeks. I went to the shopping malls and as I looked around, I found myself wishing my friends were around, the way they cracked jokes and made a good time out of nothing. I knew they would love to see these shops and I was lamenting their presence at this moment. I soon decided to go home and rest up, feeling a little bit homesick.

Two days later, it was my first day of work. I looked in the mirror, fully dressed and I was excited and nervous. I Ubered to the office with my box of office supplies and walked up to the receptionist, informing her that I was starting my new position today. My voice became shaky as I spoke. She was an older lady, with an intimidating demeanor, and it felt like she didn't have time to deal with me. I felt my confidence drop and my body language close up. She sighed as she got up, guided me to my boss's office, and introduced me. He gave me a cold smile as he shook my hand. He dismissed the receptionist and started by giving me a tour. He walked me through every room and office, introducing me to whoever was working. I noticed that everyone seemed uninterested in the new guy, which was fine, but there was nobody I found any real comfort in. I said my hello's and then he finally walked me to a door which didn't have a name plaque next to it.

"Well this right here is your office," he stated flatly. He opened the door, while telling me how excited they were to have me, though I noticed his tone did not match the excitement of his words. He spoke almost like a machine that was prompted to say these things. He said I could spend my first day decorating and getting myself familiar with the programs I would be using. It would be a fairly easy day, as I hoped, and I was excited to get my office put together.

I looked around my office, as it almost appeared abandoned. There was a layer of dust everywhere but otherwise it was clean and spacious. It just gave an eerie vibe that I couldn't fully shake. My boss then left me to put together my office and I started unpacking. I found my duster among my supplies and I cleaned up the desk, finding the beautiful wooden brown color that hid under the white haze. I started setting my desk up like how it was when I was back home, and it gave me a bit of the same comfort that I was starting to miss. I finished putting up the last couple of pictures and took a look at everything, smiling softly. For a moment, it felt familiar. But I knew I couldn't get comfortable. I grabbed my computer and began looking at the programs I would be using, familiarizing myself with the ones that I hadn't used before. The hours passed quickly and then I quickly got back home to cook dinner and get some sleep in for the next day of work.

Two weeks go by and I can hardly contain myself as my parents will be arriving soon to drop off my car and stay with me for a few days. The past few weeks had been mentally hard on me, so seeing my parents would make things a little easier right now. I smile as I see two cars slow down next to me. I guide them to where they could park and welcome them into my home. I had made them a home cooked meal for the first night so we could have the night to ourselves. During dinner, we smiled, laughed, and I got to share sweet memories with my parents in my new apartment. Over the days they were here, I took them to the shopping malls and restaurants. My mother went home with what seemed to be an entirely new wardrobe. It made me smile to see that had never changed, as my mother always loved fashion and jumped at the opportunity to wear new clothes.

Before I knew it, it was time for my parents to leave. I didn't think it would affect me, but tears were shed when we were saying our goodbyes, and even more tears were shed after they left. I had spent the rest of the day curled up in a ball, realizing just how homesick I was. As someone who really valued their friends and family, it was incredibly hard being away from them for this long. Maybe a little part of me was starting to regret moving over here. After a few hours in my bed, I remembered I had my car and decided to go for a night drive. It was one of my favorite things to do at home to get my mind off things, and I had special spots I would escape to. Since I just got my car back, I hadn't had the opportunity to find any spots yet, so I figured I'd start now. I got in my car and took a deep inhale, embracing the familiar scent. I can tell that my mother had been driving the car because the seat was pushed forward and the mirrors were unaligned with my sight. I almost didn't want to move anything because I would be erasing the feeling of my mother being there, but I wouldn't have been able to drive, so I hesitantly readjusted everything. I started driving around the city, getting accustomed to driving in Los Angeles.

After two hours of this, I started making random left and right turns where it didn't seem to lead to the city. The task was harder than it sounds, as Los Angeles seemed to have a big district every few blocks, but that's not what I was looking for. After a while, I found myself on a rocky road, and I grinned as I noticed I was approaching a hill. It was starting to feel like Idaho, it was mountainous like the roads that would lead me to my favorite spots. I knew I just had to keep going, as I felt that I was approaching something promising. That gut feeling was right, as I only drove for about 10 more minutes before I found a place to pull over. I pulled over eagerly, my eyes widening when I realized the beautiful sight in front of me. I could see the tall buildings, the city lights, and the colors that coated the city. For the first time in weeks, I was able to breathe. The beauty of viewing the city from above was different from what the views in Idaho, but it was a refreshing beauty nonetheless. Immediately, I knew that I would be here often.

I stared into the view, taking in everything around me. With all this beauty around me, I couldn't help but think about how miserable I've been since I got here. I was excited for this new job, to make more money, to meet more people. But the only thing that hasn't let me down so far is the money, and money is no use when you feel alone. My new boss was a hardass, and he wasn't welcoming like my old boss. I haven't made any breakthroughs with my coworkers, which was hard as I was really close with all my old coworkers. I haven't had the chance to make any friends out here either. As I thought about all the events that led up to this moment, I laid my seat back to lay down and opened my sunroof, as I often did back home. No matter what state I was in, the stars would feel consistent. After all, I was now in the city of stars. I looked up at the sparkling dots,

allowing myself to find pictures in their arrangements. As I looked up, I wondered, how could someone feel so dim in the city of stars?

I decided to take my car back to my apartment and Uber to the nearest bar, as I needed a drink. I have work in the morning though, so 1-2 drinks is probably all I could take. My Uber swiftly got me to the bar and I found my way to the drinks. I start with my one drink and breeze through it faster than I intended. I know I need to slow down, so I wait a minute or two before becoming impatient and ordering another drink, scarfing that one down almost quicker than the first. I sat there, lost in thought, and the drinks didn't seem to be helping as the time passed. To empty my mind, I watched the game that played on the screen. It was a football game, and it was just starting, as it was only a few minutes into the first quarter, so I figured I would stick around until I got bored of it.

Hours went by and before I knew it, the game had ended. I stayed for the entire game, and even worse, I couldn't even remember how many drinks I had. I didn't even realize how drunk I was until I stood up. I lost my balance, grabbing at the barstool to compose myself before ordering another Uber back home. I passed out as soon as my body made contact with the bed.

I woke up feeling groggy, my eyes having a hard time adjusting to the light. I grabbed my phone and my eyes widened. It was past 10 AM. Work started at 8. I frantically got dressed, until my stomach reminded me of my actions from the night before. I needed something in my stomach to soak up the drinks before thinking about going into work. I texted my boss a quick lie about having car issues and a thorough apology for not reaching out sooner, assuring him this wouldn't happen again. He texted me that it was okay, and to just make it to work if I could. It didn't seem like he was upset, so I calmed down before going to the nearest coffee shop. I ordered a muffin and a coffee to offset the feeling in my stomach. I placed my order and then sat down to wait for it to finish.

"For Liliana," I hear the barista call out as I pull out my phone to check notifications I missed. This causes me to look up and lock eyes with the Uber driver who helped me start my journey here. I flash a wide smile at her and she grabs her drink and makes her way over to me.

"You!" she says sweetly. I offer her to sit down with me while I wait for my name to be called. While I wasn't really in the mood to talk, there was something about her presence that made me want to chat a bit. She asked how I've been, and I opened my mouth to start my rant when the barista called my name. I smile and lift one finger to signal that I'd be back in a second, and walk over to pick up my order. I sat back down across from her and told her what I had been going through. As I spoke, I could tell she was really listening. I finished my rant and she smiled at me sympathetically. "Well, I am always open to more friends," she says, placing her hands on the table, expecting my hands to join hers. There was such a genuine feeling to her that I could see us being friends while I navigated everything. I place my hands in hers to signify the unity we just created.

She stands up with my hands in hers and my eyes widen. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"I'm gonna show you my favorite spots," she says nonchalantly, almost as if I was supposed to have already known that. I thought about pulling away but I couldn't imagine myself in my office after the night I just had. I texted my boss that my car needed repairs and they needed me to sign some paperwork so I wouldn't make it in today. He texted back quickly that it was okay and that he hoped I got everything figured out. I let out a sigh of relief and looked up at Liliana.

"Let's do it," I shrug as she guides me to her car. She starts driving and I ask where we are going. She said we're going to start with brunch, and we were in the car for about 15 minutes until



we stopped at a cute little restaurant. We sat inside and she gave me her recommendations. The time went by so quickly, as we ate and chatted. We were there for about an hour and a half, just learning about each other, laughing, and talking. We finished up eating and then headed back to Liliana's car where she took me to her favorite ice cream place. I decided on butter pecan and it was delicious. Liliana got their mint flavor and she fed me some, trying to prove to me she got the best flavor. It was delicious, but I liked mine better and fed her some to prove my point as well. After ice cream, she took me to Santa Monica Pier and we walked around and played some games. I had to accuse her several times of coming here often because she was kicking my butt in every game we played. She won a huge stuffed animal and laughed as she presented it to me to take home. I insisted that she won it so she should keep it, but she kept saying she wanted it to be a token of our new friendship. We went on a few rides together and just had a really great time, before we ran out of things to do there.

At this point, the sun had gone down and I was tired. I figured she would take me back to my car after the long day we just had. She knew I was pretty tired and I laid my seat back, letting her drive while I shut my eyes for a bit. We drove and I lost track of time as I started to doze off.

"Alright, we've made it to our last stop of the day," I hear Liliana's delicate voice call out, awakening me from the light sleep I had entered.

"Last stop? You got a lot of energy girl," I grumbled and moved my chair back up. I rubbed my eyes and yawned, allowing my eyes to adjust to the plethora of lights in front of me. The sight looked familiar but I couldn't pinpoint it yet. I rubbed my eyes a little bit more and realized we were at the same viewpoint I visited the night before. I looked at her in shock.

"What? I usually come up here when I need an escape, and I feel like it would be helpful for you too so I wanted to show you," she stated. I informed her of my adventure from less than 24 hours ago and she laughed at the coincidence. "Well, looks like we have the same safe place," she said, looking into my eyes. I'm not sure what came over me but I leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her lips, pulling away quickly when I realized what I had done. I glanced at her face to try and read her expression, but before I could even try she had leaned back in for a deeper kiss. I could feel my heart beating out of my chest as it happened...

— 6 years later —

I was playing dolls with my daughters, pretending they were going shopping together while my wife, Liliana, was in the kitchen cooking dinner. She had been acting so frantic all day and insisted on starting dinner at 2 PM. The girls were on a break from school and I just excused her odd behavior from wanting to spend the most time as a family while we had the girls home. I tell the girls I will be right back while I go to check on my wife, sneaking up from behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist. She jumps a bit out of surprise, and she turns a bit to give me a peck.

As I hold her, the doorbell rings, and she asks if I can get it. I open the door and my eyes widen in surprise. It was my best friends from Idaho, and I gasp as I throw myself at them to give them big hugs. I look around frantically and find my wife behind me, recording the moment.

"What? How?" I ask in complete shock. They explained to me that Liliana invited them over for the week and that they made the drive to spend the week with me. I walk over to my wife and give her a kiss, realizing how she always finds a way to prioritize the things I value and how I truly lucked out by hopping into that Uber during my first day in the City of Stars.

*Falling for Life*

By: Nathaniel Joel Cuaresma

The gentle, tender summer wind blew through the tall oak trees and overgrown meadow at Babylon Park, carrying with it the laughter of children playing by the jagged cliffs. It caressed the two figures who stood before the Great Tower, both gazing upwards observing its intimidating, awe-inspiring height. Atop the structure, touching the sky, was a great observatory the philosophers of old had used to peer into the heavens. The warm golden sunlight, soft as a mother's embrace, streamed through the branches, casting shifting shadows upon the verdant earth. White, wooly clouds passed overhead, progressing towards the Western Sea that shimmered and shined as it reflected the setting sun's radiant luminosity. Birds of brown, red, and blue feathers chirped a mystical chorus that filled the air with vibrant life and spirited song.

The two were brothers, both born to the same mother and father. One boy was dressed in heavy steel chainmail from head to toe. At his side were strapped six iron swords, all with hilts made of pine. On his back was an enormous brown pack filled with precious metals and jewels—gold, silver, diamonds, and tempered bronze. The other boy was dressed in dirty rags, carrying with him only a beaten journal and a pen filled with ink.

“Shall we climb it?” asked the armored boy, glancing disdainfully at his ragged partner.

“Yes, I believe we should,” answered the other.

“Why should I? What good does this do me? It is nothing more than unnecessary work, a burdensome task without any value whatsoever.”

“Why should we not? We journeyed all this way in search of Life. Even if this is not the goal we seek, there may yet be something worth seeing at its peak.”

“Then go on without me! I refuse to waste my precious time on such a pointless and absurd endeavor. Go forth and ascend in those filthy castoffs of yours, fool.”

“Then I shall go alone,” the brother said with eyes clear as the starry sky after the Spring rains. “I will see what awaits me at those heights!”

He set off quickly, entering the Tower through the Glittering Gate, a doorway carved from the purest pyrite. His brother gazed longingly after him, grounded to the dirt by his chains and his treasures. He was dizzy with confusion, frustration, and hatred, his emotions howling at him to move onwards down the path. The Accuser that dwelled within his heart awoke and began to hiss its whispers of deceit—began to curse him in the foul tongue of Demons.

“You are a worthless coward. You are an accursed failure. You are undeserving of life. Die. Die. Die!” The voice halted its assault. “You are already dead.”

Darkness enveloped the world. Sounds of distant screams, disdainful words, and croaking ravens filled his mind. The fiery hand of hell grabbed hold of his heart and tightly clenched his lungs. Air evaded his desperate gasps. His quivering legs gave way to the burdens that crushed his spirit, mind, and body. He collapsed at the feet, at the entrance to Ascension.

+ + +

In his unclean, soiled garments, the boy scaled the heights of the Tower. Its halls were filled with magnificent artistry, ancient treasures, and expansive gardens where trees of all kinds bore fresh, sweetly aromatic fruits. He traveled at a consistent, steady pace, never staying in a single place for too long. On occasion, he would record the wonders he witnessed in his little

beaten book with his pen full of ink. Yet his heart stayed fixated on reaching the highest peak. Even as golden meadows turned to arid deserts, and arid deserts turned to dark, lifeless marble floors, he continued on upwards. He walked, he walked, and he walked. Hours became days and days became weeks. Still, he persisted. Still, he endured. Though his legs wearied and his mind grew exhausted, he climbed higher and higher towards the heavens.

+ + +

In a small, dull dreary hall devoid of sound and light, the boy reached a rotting wooden door. The hinges had rusted millennia ago, yet the handle of pure gold remained unchanged. His apparel was in tatters, his feet were burned and cracked, and his body was covered in sores. The little book that he cherished had lost its covering, only an ever-weakening binding holding the pages of his life together. His pen was nearly dry, only possessing ink enough for a few small words. He gazed at the door with empty eyes. Yet, a small smile grew on his face as he opened the last page of his book and wrote, "*I made it to the end.*" With the last of his mortal strength, he pushed open the door and walked out into darkness.

Harsh, freezing winds blew against his frail being with ferocity. His garments were ripped from his body, and the pages of his book were whisked out into the void. There was no cheery sun to give him warmth and vitality. There were no stars to give him hope. There was no more forward direction. There was only the bitter cold and the suffocating murky shadow. Fatigued and plagued by weariness, the boy stumbled and fell as the wind howled and cried, biting at his ears with its icy touch. His senses were deadened. His body was numb. His mind was fading into oblivion. He was passing away.

+ + +

The warmth of another's touch flooded his being with energy. His eyes shot open and were greeted by the celestial bodies that dotted the sky, shimmering and shining in the ocean of darkness. The fierce wind had given way to a cool, gentle breeze that carried with it the scent of the Western Sea far below, its waves crashing against the rocky shores. A young girl sat near him, poking at his arms. She was dressed in brown, red, and blue, the colors made visible by soft starlight from above.

"Who are you, kid?" she inquired. Her voice was unsteady and hoarse, yet it possessed undertones of a sweet and musical song. "Why are you here?"

"I am Adam. I came here searching for Life," he answered. His voice was clear, yet his words tasted like old, bitter black coffee.

"Well Adam, I'm afraid you have come to the wrong place. There is nothing here but the remains of ancient philosophers and their beloved books." She stood up and walked towards a great dome of classical Roman design. It stood alone in the center of a great marble court, one that was once called Olympus.

"Why are you here, miss?" he called out after her. Sitting up, he found to his pleasant surprise that his corpse had mended itself. The swelling sores and burned skin had vanished along with the searing pain that they wrought. His youthful strength and vitality were restored.

The girl stopped and looked back. "The same as you. I came here in search of Life."

"Well, did you find it?"

“No. I have scoured the world looking, but it evades me. It is not in the powerful winds, the mighty quakes, or the fires of men. It is not in the forests, the mountains, or the desert canyons. It is not in the throne room of kings, the halls of scholars, nor even at the highest peaks of the Great Tower.” She paused. “It is not in this world, and it is not of this world. Life is beyond our attainment for as long as we are mortal.”

She turned and walked towards the tower’s edge, each step heavy with sorrow. Only the sound of the passing breeze disturbed their silence. Below, the birds began to sing their harmonious chorus once more. In the distance, a rooster crowed three times, heralding the coming of dawn. The stars were fading quickly as the sky brightened into a gloomy blue. At this, the boy stood up. He found that he now wore white robes woven together with golden linen.

Breathing in the pure, fresh air, he sighed. “Yes, it seems Life is not here after all.” Thinking now of his brother far below, he wondered about how he was to descend and return to the place from which he came.

“But I know where it is,” the girl whispered.

She peered out over the walls and gazed intently at the Eastern Valley. A blazing orange glow burst from beneath the desolate, barren ground, illuminating the clouds while setting fire to the sky. The heavens blazed in scarlet, violet flames as the murky darkness burned away.

“I will taste Life in all its fullness,” she stated with firm resolve, her voice as clear as the morning bells. “This never-ending nightmare shall come to an end.”

The voice within her mind and her heart was blaring out its single message. “Throw yourself down from here and feel the thrill, the thrill that is Life in its purest form!”

The serpentine voice was sweet like honey, as charming and tantalizing as fresh fruit from forbidden trees. It promised freedom and the gift of Life to any who would heed and follow its counsel. “Feel what it means to be free from your burdens and your struggles. Feel what it means to be alive! Go!”

The girl was taken in by its words. Her mind and heart were in ecstasy as they eagerly pursued the promise of Life. Yet her spirit groaned and mourned, the sounds being too deep for words and beyond utterance in the tongues of men.

“What do you mean?” asked the boy.

“This Tower was constructed long ago to reach the heavens and attain Life,” she said. “Our ancestors sought total understanding of this mysterious Power and Truth that Man seemed unable to grasp.”

Turning from the East and facing the West, she gazed at the boy who now stood basked in vibrant, fiery light. His robes reflected the intense glory of a rising sun, the gold linen shimmering and shining as he stood before her. She herself was illuminated by the distant glow, bathed in scarlet heat.

“And what of it?” he replied, puzzled by her words.

“They toiled for centuries constructing their greatest work. Man was building a bridge to what they believed was God—Eternal Meaning. But they could never reach Him. After all, He does not dwell in the sky nor in the starry realm beyond it.”

She looked up at him, peering deep into his eyes. “Thus, they were forced to forever lust for the unreachable atop their meaningless achievements and centuries of work.”

“It may be so. But their work was far from meaningless. Look! You have climbed the Tower. You have tasted the fruit of their labor. You have seen the magnificent architecture, wisdom, and wealth that their efforts yielded to them.”



“And what of it?” she asked, her voice now saturated with vicious poison. “Nothing came of it. All they left was a worthless Tower filled with pain, suffering, and aging books.”

She turned once more towards the East, towards the brilliant display of a coming day. However, all she could see were stormy clouds and an endless night.

“But you see, I know how to obtain freedom from this inescapable suffering. I know how to end this era of pain. I know the secret of Life.”

Before the boy could speak, she had cast herself from the peak and was hurtling like a shooting star down toward Earth. Electricity filled the entirety of her being as she laughed a joyous cry. The clouds in her eyes had subsided, and she beheld the beginning of a new day—a sky alight with divine red, orange, indigo, and violet color. The wind howled in her ears as she plummeted towards inevitable Death, the thrill of the Fall overriding rationality and any remnant of reason remaining. From her lips came a victorious shout.

“I am alive! I am alive! I have tasted of Life itself! I have attained the unobtainable and understood the incomprehensible! I am free!”

She descended ever more rapidly as the seconds passed. Tears streamed from her eyes as she fell, subtle and bitter despair gnawing at her soul. Conceited, delirious, and confused, she crashed into the desolate land. The Earth was dyed a hellish red as her spirit was swallowed up by the world below.

+ + +

The boy watched her fall. He stumbled backward, finding himself gazing up at a clear blue morning sky. His eyes observed the passing of the sun and wooly clouds, yet his mind had stepped out of time’s linear flow. He had tasted Eternity. As he blinked, day became night, and night became day. The stars came and the stars went. The sun rose and the sun fell. He, however, stayed stagnantly in place. When at last he rose from his fall, it was dusk once more. Soon, the great multitude of heavenly jewels filled the sky, forming signs of a season about to pass. Sitting now in the ancient observatory, he admired their majesty and splendor. He stared at them for hours, observing the artistry that each of those little worlds all formed when woven together. While far beyond his reach, he was nevertheless simply content to admire them as they were. A longing for the song of birds, the laughter of children, and the warmth of sunlight began to grow deep within his heart. A love for the sea, the sun, and the starry sky instilled him with an unspeakable joy that surpassed understanding. A quiet, calm yet firm desire to live formed in the depths of his soul. He had fallen for the beauty of Life itself.

### “The Stranger”

The Stranger never learned how to swim.

It must have been a twist of fate when they're thrown into the dark abyss, the freezing ocean gladly swallows them up whole. Their feet kicked wildly as they tried to fight back, but there was only so much they could do.

They could see the stars shine brightly above them as they sank further and further down. The Stranger hoped the stars would grant them a sliver of hope, a reassuring twinkle — *anything* — but they were met with nothing as they vanished from sight.

There was nothing around them, but they knew better. They could feel eyes watching them from the shadowy depths like an eager audience awaiting the lead actor. The Stranger found comfort in the tight metal chain that tied their hands behind their back.

Even the waters were friendly enough to remind them that they are going to die.

They aren't allowed the chance to panic. What good would it do? What could they do against strong currents and hungry creatures? It was with these thoughts that The Stranger surrendered themselves to the sea.

The Stranger clings onto their humanity and so they did what humans were gifted with: They thought.

They remembered the way [REDACTED] cleaned their cat plushie, *Blanco*.

The soft black fabric smelled of laundry detergent, the same scent [REDACTED] carried with grace around their home. The Stranger would hold *Blanco* close to their chest, its lumpy body caressing their cheek, and try to ignore the harsh winds and thunderstorms.

Oh, how much The Stranger would love to see [REDACTED] again. To whisper a small prayer together.

*Blanco* must still be on their bed, waiting for their owner to come back. “It'd be nice... to be warm... again.”

They remember the way [REDACTED] brought home dinner.

It wasn't anything remarkable. Three plastic plates with greasy tacos from a local food truck were placed on the dinner table as everyone ate in silence. The meat was perfectly cooked as The Stranger unfolded it from the tinfoil, steam pouring out. There was *salsa*, limes, chopped onions and *cilantro* in small plastic bags, and they were quickly devoured.

All of a sudden, [REDACTED] blasts *Selena*'s music from a worn cellphone, her singing voice filling the empty space. They playfully grabbed [REDACTED] by the waist as if trying to recreate a dance they once shared. The tacos tasted sweeter after the Stranger witnessed the scene.

“Would there be... three plates today...?” The Stranger could almost taste it.

They remember the way [REDACTED] laughed.

They both sat in a secluded corner of their college campus well-hidden by lush trees. A tour group passed them by and just as The Stranger was about to say something, [REDACTED] got to it first.

The Stranger saw [REDACTED] eyes scrunched up as they tried to finish the story they were telling. Their shoulders were shaking with a weak attempt to hold back their laughter, but it failed not a moment later.

[REDACTED] body fell onto the grass below them, clutching their sides as their face turned as red as an apple. The Stranger lightly chuckles before smirking at an idea in their head. They started to tickle their sides, watching as [REDACTED] pleaded with them to stop until both of them were rolling around on the grass with wide smiles.

“What would...?” The Stranger lost their thoughts.

Their hands are numb. They feel weightlessness coarse through their veins as if they were in space, but ever aware of the pressure. Maybe if their ears weren't clogged, they would hear the whales singing.

The Stranger's life flashes before their eyes.

They remember having a nightmare and sneaking into [REDACTED] room to sleep beside them. They remember playing video games with [REDACTED]. They remember finally saying 'I love you'. They remember cuddling up to warm blankets and soft music. They remember walking back to their parked car. They remember [REDACTED] holding a knife to their throat. They remember–

Their lungs burn.

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On September 19, 2023 – A body was discovered on the coastline of [REDACTED]. Due to the conditions on the body, the police have not been able to identify the body. If anyone has a loved one who visited [REDACTED], contact authorities immediately.

May God have given them the mercy of a quick death.

## **Do you know where the stars go after they burn?**

*Author's Note: Please listen to Lana del Rey's Chemtrails over the Country Club with this.*

I'm a silent orb of unfulfilled glory.

Ready to burst yet my time has passed.

Every night, I feel the stares, I feel the laughter, I feel the judgment. The other stars shine bright. They bask in the attention of love-sick couples, lonely authors, depressed teenagers. I can feel the glow and the eclipse. I have been overshadowed both in life and death.

Did you know that if you die in the City of Stars, you can become one with the stars? Your body lays in the cold soil yet your soul drifts slowly up, like a diaphanous dress in the wind. But what limit is there? How high can you reach even after your earthly death?

It seems that history has repeated itself. I have not reached a satisfactory result. Not in life, not in death. By life, I am undone. By death, I am trapped. Trapped in a turmoil of loss and dissatisfaction.

I burn.

Yet no one sees.

No one feels.

Mother, oh my dear old mother. Will you still love me even when I burn? Even when the last of my embers have died? Will you still have a place at home for me? Home is neither here nor there but only in your arms.

Father, father, are you proud of me? Do you remember the round-faced actress, your one and only daughter, fresh out of school? Do you remember when I used to shine brightly? When the audience rose to its feet and we heard the mellifluous sound of applause? The music, it was music to my ears!

Oh, the earth, the sweet earth. So beautiful, so terrible. How could you be so lovely when I was an innocent child? How could you cruelly tear me apart as I grew up? My sweet earth, you never forgive, you always forget.

Do you remember the days at the cafe? Do you remember the incessant criticism, the foolish patrons, the disrespect? Do you remember the days at the restaurant? How about at the glorious mall? Oh how many jobs have you stumbled about? Too many to count, too little to ever forget.

Audition after audition. Rejection after rejection. How my mind spun and spun! Somedays, I live trapped in the confines of my own mind. Some people have warned me about the outside world. No

one has warned me about the cruelty of your own mind. Razor-sharp, cutthroat, knife-edged. That's what your mind is. It shows me no mercy.

*Sense the failure, it rasps.*

*Your mediocrity is utterly humiliating.*

*A shameless little thing, aren't you?*

*Another faceless death, that is what you are.*

Sometimes, I curl up in the corner of my room. Immobile, clawing my hair, a teardrop falls. I cannot stop it. I simply don't know how.

I could feel a black cloud descending. It slinks its way into my vulnerable mind. Every crack, every crevice. It whirls and swirls. It conquers and takes. I cannot feel. I cannot feel. I CANNOT FEEL.

Oh where is my heart? Where can I find it? Is it buried in the cruel earth among my scattered failures? Or is it already in the sky, waiting for me? Shall I join it? Shall I claim back what was once mine?

Whatever shall I do!

I don't know.

I cannot think. I cannot feel.

Have I tried? I have tried. I have tried. My darling, I have tried so very hard. But I am tired. I am so very tired. Can I give up? May I give up? May I leave? Would a bow at the stage be satisfactory? But the irony! I have never even made it on a stage. Always too far from my reach. Glory was always just too far.

I cannot believe it. I've always dreaded the day where I settle for mediocrity instead of pursuing the greatness I was destined for. And yet I feel that it is so very easy for me to accept the little that I have instead of fighting onwards.

I have been fighting my whole life. So is it time to join the stars? Will they have a place for me when I go? Or shall I be exiled to the darkest corners of the universe? And if there is no place in the cosmos, shall I even exist? It is a funny thing, isn't it? I'm not sure whether I have lived nor have I existed. I am floating through space and time; my head here, my heart there, yet none exist.

I am a shell of unfilled glory.

My fire has gone, my embers have long burned.

I feel nothing, I am nothing.

I was once so beautiful. Where did my beauty go?

The tips of my fingers seem to fade. Breaking into immeasurable pieces of stardust and lifeless particles. Has my punishment come? And yet I don't know why I'm being punished. I couldn't be because you'd be a fool if you thought that death is the worst punishment for me.

A release is what it is.

Life takes everything. Death takes nothing. Death gives life. Death brought life to a new version of me.

Why should you fear death? Death is utterly meaningless unless you make it greater than life. So I smile. I'm floating. I must say goodbye to the City of Stars. How its name was trickery! I never recalled anything so bright or beautiful down on earth.

But I'm rising. I'm in the wind. I'm in the water. I'm one with the sky. I'm nothing as I glide across the City of Stars. I took nothing from earth, so I leave nothing behind. Nothing but a trail of tears of memories and the remains of my useless dignity. A seraphic being, that I am. But who will see me shine?

I am in the eye of you now. Yet no one sees me. I am overshadowed by former glories and stars. Still. Again.

I've never known that you could die twice.

And yet I already feel it, I already feel the collapse of the star. First, it was the death of a little girl. A little girl with unreachable dreams. The City of Stars called to her, it told her to shine as bright as she could. But every candle eventually fades out.

Sometimes life douses it out first.

It is now the death of a star. But what have I ever done to deserve such a title? If not a little girl, not a star, what am I? Who am I?

I am another nameless memory. Fading into oblivion. Burning out in the darkness.

But I have hoped, I have only hoped, that perhaps a trace, smidge, crumb of me will be etched faintly in the sky. So if you look up at the starry night, hopefully my remnants of quixotic dreams and unaccomplished lust would be there, blinking feebly. But I was there.

But I have also learned my lesson all too well:

The world never forgives, the world always forgets.