

One Million Shards of Light

I don't even care. This shit is dumb, anyway. He mumbled to himself beneath the morning light which broke, fractured, into the room through dirt-caked windows. He turned to the mirror, backpack pressed firmly against his shoulder blades like he was some regular honors student. *Feo. Bullshit.* He pounded his fist against his jacket pocket, bruised knuckles burning.

A muffled groan came from the corner of the room. *Where are you going?*

School, mama. He bowed his head. *I'm going back, remember?*

Oh. He twisted the doorknob like it was some enemy's neck, turning away from her, when she called after him. *Be careful, mijo.* He ducked out the door, slamming it behind him.

The next Fourth of July, we sat together on the back porch, craning our necks toward fireworks we could hardly see over the tops of the cottonwood trees. When the sound finally reached us, just far enough from the city that we could feel the lapse, he began to cry. In the morning, when the sun rose like a forest fire, gnarled branches littered the ground like shrapnel.

That summer lived forever, but never in the way it was meant to. Autumn had barely begun to color itself golden before the September leaves trembled and fell, and not two weeks later he dropped out of school—to work, he told me, and to take care of his nephew, and because *it's all bullshit and besides*, it was too dangerous for him to go back there. He didn't even care, really, he'd never have graduated anyway. And the conversation closed, and then he only talked about his girl and his new tattoo and his eighteenth birthday, when he'd get out of there, find somewhere cool and far away from all the wreckage he calls home.

As far as I can recall, this is around the time he started painting. In the beginning, he would snap paintbrushes with his boldest strokes and tear gashes in the canvases while signing his name. Still, the colors never changed: blushing marigolds, mints and roses, frosted daffodils—all dashed intermittently with pewters, ambers, olives, charcoals, and gunpowders. He has never painted monsters, which has always come as a surprise to me, just like he has never painted heroes. He lives somewhere in between, I guess, giving form to whatever kind of character he sees in those around him. Giving face to something nameless, some internal being previously stripped bare.

He throws gang signs like I bite my nails, mindlessly and with a sense of shame about him. He describes his childhood in the same way he talks about his nightmares, empty of verbs and fractured beneath his skipping-record tongue. I suppose this is why painting always appealed to him: colors and movements had never failed him the way words had.

Everything else I know about him, I know from his paintings.

There's this one of a neighborhood street, the kind neatly pruned with white picket fences over which neighbors swap family recipes in anticipation of the upcoming block party. Pansies on the windowsills, lace curtain-lined windowpanes, a basketball hoop on each driveway adjacent to two-car garages—all of this colored in lilac and peach, periwinkle and custard yellow, kelly green and baby blue, accentuated by beads of flamingo-lawn-ornament pink.

And then there are the ghosts.

If you ask him, he will tell you those white figures are just children: puddle-splashed and playing soccer, or carrying schoolbooks, or hopscotch giggling. *They're sweet. Happy*, he might say, shrugging and stepping back slightly, eyes avoiding yours. *Just kids.* But they are always just a little too pale, a little too slender, and always with these shadows at least twice the size of their bodies and bleeding off in all directions.

Somewhere near the horizon, heavy darkness fades over a city of gold. The skyline is made of glass, a mosaic of hollow buildings and street-lamps like thousands of tiny dawns. An intricate series of roads unfolds across the landscape like veins, surrounded by burnt orange, coral, lilac, and forest green. Then a sky dusted with ash over a shattered horizon. The corners of buildings cut toward one another like reflections in a broken mirror; trees snap and turn to wisps of smoke; windows break against the fire-lit night. All of this he paints from severed strokes: a glowing moon the color of still-burning embers, soft lines of white and grey crosshatched like scars across the canvas. And the ghosts, of course.

It was always ghosts.

His brush could have snapped in his fist long before he reached his future. Maybe, in his bloodshot rage, he ripped the canvases to shreds. Maybe his palette, like his city, began to bleed and flake away, leaving him alone among splintered wood and bare bones. But this scene was his, after all, and as much as he cared to be made of stone, he was as much water as flint. *I do what I have to*, he might say. *Nothing more.*

He's got a painting he's working on right now, the kind he'll keep returning to for years, always on some back easel or stashed beneath summer's shoeboxes to be found when the season changes. *I'll know when it's done*, he says. *And when to come back.*

There's this boy in the center of the painting—a young kid, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old—and this road that stretches on for miles, making him look so small. And there are all these angles and colors, like rays of light, coloring his world from every direction, like he's in the center of a kaleidoscope or on the far end of a refracted camera lens. He's one million broken shards of light.

It's laid out like a series, strips of film arranged side-by-side, and as he moves forward, the scene changes slightly. There are some constants, of course: the ghosts around him (it's always ghosts), red bandanas and skies of smoke. In this one, a school bus. In that one, bloodied knuckles and a black eye. In the other, an alleyway and no place to go. Then it's back to the bus, back to his girl, back to *whatever*.

It goes like this, he says. *Never had a home for long.*

The kid in the painting, he graduated high school one day in May, despite all the times he said he never would because *it's all bullshit anyway and besides*, it's not like his life would ever go anywhere. And he cried when he saw through splintered eyes his mother, watching him step forward on that stage (*toward something she never had*, he said, and that's why it scared her so) with tears in her eyes. And then he jumped to rose and gold and said goodbye to her.

Hello, my life, he said, and trembled, all cobalt blue and Picasso.

Then, a greyhound bus and his backpack, pressed firmly against his shoulder blades like someone with somewhere to be (and to belong). The ghosts, *who were never really ghosts at all*, he said, waved good-bye with tears in their eyes and began to swallow themselves whole.

Broken glass glistens in the merciless sun. The new light, having pierced the tranquil morning and set the birds to shrieking, unfolds the world before him—and so he unfolds as well, slowly and with the clumsy care of a child—from cubist blocks to impressionistic strokes. The future lags like a firework-filled night. The trees press like brushes against an ever-changing sky.

And he remains: having forgotten me, for now, like something scattered amongst the flecks of paint and unstretched canvases he left behind.