

Of Feathers

When I first landed on Earth, I created a crater ten feet wide. My delicate wings shriveled up in the heat of the sun. The feathers, once pristine and soft, were dark and lifeless. My hands ran over the scars that marked the place they connected to my back again and again, hoping that, by some miracle, I would be whole once more. Bruises and burns crawled up my arms, another grim reminder that I was now human.

I buried my wings three days after the fall, when there was nothing left of them but hollow bones. I heaved mountains of dirt from the ground carelessly even though my fingers bled from the sharp particles. With shaking hands, I lay them to rest in a grave of dust and rocks. I forced myself not to look back as I walked away.

I stood in the middle of a battlefield. The valley before me had been destroyed, fire and silver blood replacing paradise. The angels clashed with one another, gold blades blinding in the reflection of the flames. I laughed as I watched a star fall. It crashed into the ground and exploded, killing four in the process. The feathers on their wings, no longer unblemished white, sizzled and disintegrated as their owners took one last breath. I reveled in the chaos—my millennia of waiting finally granting rewards. Patience truly is a virtue.

Each dead soul, no matter which side they belonged to, gave me power. I grew taller, my wings longer. Soon, only God could have met my forces. But he hid, as he always had. I smiled and leapt into the fray. I would rule, and those who accepted my ways would be reborn into a utopia. No cries would be left unheard, no questions would be unanswered. Those who held to the old regime would be cast like dewdrops from a shaken leaf. The old God abandoned his subjects, leaving them in their time of need. I would teach the angels of a life they couldn't even dream of.

Weeks passed in slow motion as I explored my mortality. I was reduced to frayed, thin clothing from dumpsters in back alleyways and only the canopies above the restaurant doors as shelter. My stomach was in constant pain because of the lack of food. When I asked people for help, most of them didn't even look me in the eye as they silently denied and walked away. I was nothing more than a fleeting thought that dissolved as they walked past.

The angels would never have believed the humans their God had created were such a cruel species. Everywhere I traveled, the newspaper headlines shouted of war and destruction. The streets were crowded with homeless people. I would sit and watch the advertisements projected on televisions in the windows of shops. They showed me heartbreaking images of malnourished children in poverty-stricken countries. I asked someone on the street what the

humans were doing to help them. “We show people what their life is like,” he said. I asked him what happens after.

He was silent.

I returned to my wings. A small sprout of green, with a single leaf, grew from the grave. In tears, I asked it why humans are so cruel to their own. They hurt, and they steal, and they refuse to help one another. It made no sense to me. I received no reply, from the heavens or elsewhere.

The thirteen mortal years I spent on Earth passed quickly and silently. My tree had flourished, a goddess standing staunchly with arms of gnarled branches extending into the open sky. I ran my fingers through the indents in the bark and leaned my head against its unyielding trunk. Its heartbeat beat with my own. That day I felt like a mother inches apart from her child, with a wall between us so we could never touch.

I couldn’t resist coming back. I knew that each time I left and returned to the life of a mortal, a piece of myself stayed with the tree. Soon it became so that I couldn’t feel, couldn’t see, couldn’t live when I was away. I sensed the footsteps of each squirrel that leaped from branch to branch, as if they were dancing on my own skin. In a way, I was just another squirrel, my survival dependent on this tree as my home.

They dragged me, chained, to the center of the room. Those who survived the battle watched me struggle and rage. I felt their pity like spiders crawling on my skin. Their god’s voice boomed from every corner of the room. “Ithemba, son of Uthol, guardian of the holy chambers. You tried to take power away from the heavens and usurp me as ruler, killing thousands. Your misguided mind, and those of your followers, will be punished. For your crimes, you will be cast from heaven.” When they heard his voice, they heard power. When I heard it, I heard nothing but a weakling.

“Where are you?” I cried out in fury. “Face me! You hide from me because you are ashamed of yourself! Everything you took from me, from all of us!” My eyes bore into those of the court. “You stand behind a ruler who charms you into following submissively. None of you will ever reclaim your freedom, your voice, under him. I hope you all live past the end of the world, so when there is nothing left except you and your God, you will realize that I was the only one who escaped!”

The ground opened to reveal a black abyss. I screamed in agony, fighting for a hold on the marble floor. The void grew larger, pulling me near. It absorbed all of my power. I could do nothing but fall.

I didn’t know what possessed me to go back to my wings. I felt nothing except the terrifying notion that something was about to die. Only my scratched arms and aching legs

proved it to be reality, and not a hellish nightmare. When I arrived, I saw construction equipment surrounding my tree, turning it into a pitiful remnant of its former glory. Each roar from a truck, each puff of smoke expelled, grabbed my lungs with an icy hand and squeezed until I couldn't draw breath. The machines rolled closer and closer to my tree. Every fallen leaf and broken branch was a part of my body.

I screamed for them to stop hurting it, to stop hurting me, but my words were ignored. I threw myself forward before they could attack again. "Stop!" I cried. No one was paying attention. The machine continued. I closed my eyes and braced myself for death.

We fell together, mighty giants reduced to pitiful slugs. I couldn't hear, couldn't see, couldn't feel. Everything was silent.

I wake up in a room that smells of rubbing alcohol. I am on a spotless, white bed surrounded by walls of gray paint. There is nothing else save for a small window in the corner. The room seems like a prison cell.

The door opens slowly. "Hey there," a woman says. I don't speak. "Can you tell me your name?" She is the epitome of calm, cool, collected.

"Where am I?" I ask, ignoring her question.

"You're in the hospital. There was a nasty accident with an excavator, but you're all fixed up now. You should be grateful. If you had been brought here even a minute later than you were, you would have died." Her voice is as bland as the room.

"Where is my tree?"

"Your tree?"

My world ends. My wings had called out for me as a last attempt at salvation, and I had failed them. There is nothing left of my old life or my immense power. I feel like a man without his arms or legs—helpless.

"Sleep now. You have been through a lot," the nurse says. I hate her suddenly. I hate all of them. How foolish I was—to believe that I was mortal, to believe that my punishment was being cast out of heaven, not the hellish life I would be forced to live. But I am forgetting already. I am angry, but there is no reason why. I fell from a high place, and had lost something important. Was it a flower? No, it was bigger. My mind is deteriorating.

The nurse stands up and puts her hand on my shoulder. She turns to go, to let me lose myself in a dream. My lips move softly as a whisper leaves my throat. "They should have killed me instead." I murmur into the air. I can't even remember who they are.