

Zachary Tan

## Without You

White flowers surround us as we lie in a field as large as the eye can see. I pick a white rose and hand it to you. You show me a smile that dulls the sun and gently tuck the rose behind your ear. You pick a white poppy to hand to me, but I don't want to accept it. You give me a frown and let go of it. It feathered to the ground, becoming lost among others of its kind. You laugh, and I force a smile. I see your mouth moving, but I don't hear any words. They must be getting lost in the wind.

Your mouth stops moving, and there is concern in your eyes. Your brow furrows and your arm slowly approaches my face. I recoil, and before I can blink you are miles away. My chest tightens as I spring up and run towards you, leaving a single person-sized impression in the flowers behind me.

As I run, the scenery around me changes. I catch glimpses of stones, trees, and shadows around me, but I can't stop running. My surroundings are moving faster than I am. The sky changes from light to dark, then back again. I keep running.

I see your shadow disappear between the folds of the horizon in the distance, and I feel a pressure all around me. I can't see anything. I can't hear anything. I keep running. I don't know where I am going. I just need to go somewhere. Anywhere but here. I hear my name being called out by wispy voices around me. I keep running. The weight on my shoulders doesn't feel so heavy if I'm doing something. Anything. I keep running.

Time loses its meaning as I keep running. I feel the world turning upside down around me. When that happened, you were always the one to keep me together. I feel a sense of

weightlessness, so I wrap my arms around myself to keep the pieces of me from floating away. I pretend it is you.

It's a habit now, I keep running. I feel the air changing around me, and I hear echoes of your voice around me. Suddenly the darkness is unbearable, so I tear at it. The weight around me lessens, and the world is revealed. I am in a grayscale city. Great monoliths tower above me, and monochrome puppets with oyster pearl eyes wander around me. I stand still in the middle of it all. I am at a loss for what I am supposed to do. Everything seems so big without you here.

I try to force color back into the world but only manage to bring back red. A crimson haze descends upon the city, and the puppets disappear. Or I can no longer see them. I look at the buildings around me, but none have doors. I walk over to one and circle it to make sure. I think that maybe you are inside it. I start pounding on where a door should be.

My hands are bloody, and my head is throbbing. Then, scarlet cracks spiderweb across the building, and it all comes crumbling down. I have a moment of panic before my world gets buried in the falling rubble.

A day? A week? An hour? I don't know how long has passed as I struggle against the broken stone. I wriggle like a maggot in hopes of the stones coming loose.

The stones get moved by shadowy hands that reach out to my still half-buried body. I frantically push them away and free my legs. I look around me to see the hazy outline of puppets take the shape of people around me. I look through them and at the world around me. The buildings have all collapsed, and the ground is carpeted in red spider lilies and colorless rubble.

I clench my fists and swing at one of the shadows reaching out to me. They judge me with iridescent eyes before disappearing in a puff of ruddy smoke. The other shadows quickly

fade away. I am alone again. Why did you leave me? Why can't I come with you? Why won't you let me?

I look at the horizon. The sun is fading into the horizon just as you did, leaving vermillion streaks across the sky. I need to chase after it. I run towards it crushing spider lilies under my feet. I yell out for it to stop sinking. Lower and lower. I yell until my voice breaks. I feel a slick liquid in my throat and cough up blood.

The city ruins surrounding me don't change. They still stretch as far as the eye can see. I stop running. I am out of breath. Maybe you are also somewhere underneath all this rubble. I switch my focus and start clawing at the nearest pile. It's a hopeless endeavor, and the rubble has a color now. It is covered in splotches of red the same color as the spider lilies.

Much of the rubble is too big to move on my own, but I try anyway. I plea to the shadows to help, but they don't stir. I glare at the shadows, and I see them trembling. I give up the digging and again start running towards the horizon.

I hear the whispering of those shadows around me, so I dig my hands into the sides of my head and rip out my eardrums. But, it doesn't make the whispering go away. I still see shadows around me, so I reach to pluck out my eyes, but something stops me.

My wrist is being held by a long shadowy beak. I watch as a body forms around the beak. It is a crane the same height as me. Embedded in the sides of its hazy head were verdant eyes. Just like the ones you had.

I snatch my arm back and try to grab its neck. I need its eyes. The crane is unmoving as my hands close around its neck.

When I meet its eyes an immense wave of shame covers me. My hands freeze, then slowly drop to my sides. I can't look into its eyes any longer, so I bring my eyes to the ground. I see my feet and find two slender strands of darkness in place of the crane's legs.

I look up, and the rubble is gone. It was replaced by a grassy plain. I look around, but I still can't find you. I look at the crane again, then fall to my knees, hopeless. I plead to the crane. I am willing to offer any part of myself to be with you again. Do you want my eyes? My arms or legs? Anything or everything that I own? You can't have my heart. Because you can't take something you already own. I also refuse to let you give it back.

The crane is standing as still as a statue. Thin tendrils of smoke spiral off its body and into the air. Its brilliant eyes sparkle like jade in the sun. I am mesmerized. I wish you could have seen them too.

I don't know how long we stood like that. We gaze at each other, our eyes locked together as you and I once were. It turns its head to the horizon and starts walking. Slowly. I follow. I don't beg or pray, no matter how much I wish to.

We step into a field of yellow daffodils. The crane steps gingerly, careful not to disturb the sea of flowers, as a crane does when hunting. I follow behind it. Where is it going? Where are you? What does it want? What do you want? What I would give to have you back.

We stop at the edge of the flower field. It cranes its head and glances at the path I carved through the daffodils. It opens its beak, but I can't hear anything. Then it spreads its wings and flies away. I stare at its disappearing figure in disbelief. Why are you leaving me? What did I do wrong?

What if we had done things differently? Would you have stayed then? If I could redo everything I would. I would cherish every moment we shared. I would listen to everything you say. So please come back.

With the daffodils behind me, I begin walking again. There is a little paved road under my feet that weaves and bends into the distance. I followed it. If I make it to the end of this road will you come back?

The sunlight dances on the swaying verdant pasture around me. Wind sends ripples across the endless field like waves on the open ocean. I look around and admire the view. Because that's what you would have done. You would have spent countless hours gazing off and talking about nothing, making it feel like you were talking about everything. I burn the view in my mind to share when I next see you. I hope it will be soon.

I look at the endless blue sky above me. There is not a cloud in sight. I am exhausted. My whole body feels loose as I slump to the ground. I lie on my back and stare at the sky. My view is engulfed by blue.

I feel drops of water on my face. That's strange because it isn't raining. If it were, you would have brought me an umbrella or a towel. I feel a dull ache in my chest emanating from the cavity where my heart should be. The one that you took. I close my eyes. I hear the whispering of shadows again. I can't and won't hear what they have to say.

I open my eyes and the grass is gone. The path is gone. The aqua sky is now a deep sapphire. My breathing feels heavy, and I struggle to draw in a breath. It was my fault, wasn't it? If I had just been better. Or stronger. Or more careful.

Maybe I should join you. I could cut my journey off right here. I want to join you, but that's not what you would have wanted, you told me because you knew what I would do. But, how tempting it is, to just stop. The path is too long anyways.

I open my eyes and there is a dark cobalt blue around me. I twist my head around and see nothing. No shadows. No grass. No flowers. No crane. No you.

I feel the muscles around my eyes tighten, so I cover them with my hand. The air grows still around me. I am floating in empty space. I want to curl into a ball, but my body will not move like I want it to.

My journey is meaningless. I have accomplished nothing. You, however, had the whole world ahead of you. You could have done so much more than what I could ever dream of. You aimed for the stars and landed on the moon. I jumped off a building and splattered on the pavement.

I want to stay here forever. But that's not what you would have wanted. Why is it only now that what I want and what you want conflict?

Do I continue my journey? Can I? I don't know. Shadows of doubt creep their way into my mind, entombing it.

I remove my hand from my eyes, but I don't get up. I look around me and see that I am lying in a bed of candytufts. They wrap around me, and I pretend that their cold embrace is yours. I want to lie here until the end of time. But that's not what you would have wanted.

I force myself to sit up. It is slow and arduous, but I eventually manage. I look around. An endless expanse of flowers: orchids, hydrangeas, roses, lilies, marigolds. I can make out rhododendrons at the end of my vision. I begin walking.

Each step feels heavier than the last and leaves me gasping for air. My body is unstable, and my vision is hazy. The whispers of the shadows grow louder as I approach the rhododendrons.

I trudge for an infinite time. I am solely focused on the horizon this time. The flowers grow closer, and I see faint figures appear around them. Their faces and figures are obscured by a hazy shadow. They stare at me with vibrant eyes. Their eyes pierce through the shadows and meet mine.

I reach them. There is worry in their eyes. There are tears in mine. They rush over to me. They embrace me. They speak to me. I do nothing. I can't do anything. They won't let me.

Their whispering is loud, and there is heat emanating from their bodies. I smile. I wish you were here, but I know this moment only exists because you aren't.

The shadows slowly disappear from their bodies to reveal familiar faces. I look back at the flower field behind me, then look back at the people around me. They move to drag me away from the flowers, and I take small and hesitant steps with them. They slow down their pace to match mine and jostle for places to stand next to me.

One of them falls over. I laugh, and the one that fell over laughs with me. I feel the hole in my chest, begin to repair itself. I don't think it will ever be healed, but it will become more bearable.

I am thinking about all the time we spent together. I will never forget. While I may never be whole without you, I won't be empty anymore.

I can't bring myself to forget you, but I also can't bring myself to tarnish my memories of you. As much as I want to stay in that field of flowers, I would only want to do so with you. So

you could see the view. I will meet you again, and when we do, I will tell you all about what I have seen. All that you couldn't. We will meet again. Hopefully later rather than sooner.

We are leaving the flowers behind now. As we do, I shoot quick looks back at them. I notice a shadowy figure among the flowers. It has the same shape as you. It gives me a small wave. Just like the ones you do. I give it a small smile and a small wave. Like I always do. The shadow pauses and then collapses in on itself. I sense a feeling of satisfaction and relief as it folds and falls into nothing. My small smile morphs into a serene one.

A world without you scares me, and I know one without me scares you. So maybe it's better we don't switch places. I need to prepare for when we next meet. I will make sure you have much to hear from me. I will make sure you live another life through me. I will wait until I've lived enough for the both of us, only then will I chase after you.