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where you have yet to go

2012 National Day on Writing Flash Fiction Winner

Milo's shadow spilled across the threshold where his feet refused to tread. He hovered at the border between the bedroom and the hall, arms folded like a shield while he watched me empty the contents of the second drawer into my duffel. Why he felt compelled to stand vigil, I couldn't say. *In case you get any wild ideas about packing up his things, too.* But what would I steal? The busted lava lamp on the nightstand? It wouldn't glow anymore. The globs just drifted listlessly through dark waters, sometimes merging together, more often breaking apart.

With the socks and scarves stowed away, I slipped around to the other side of the bed. Plucking my glasses off the bureau, my favorite sweater from beneath the bed, I gathered all the pieces of myself I'd seeded throughout the apartment. They'd never taken root. I wasn't much of a gardener—or so said the three dead rhododendrons Milo had finally replaced with plastic. How long before he replaced me too?

He wouldn't, and that was half the problem. Even on those nights I woke for the fourth time because the neighbor's Chevy backfired as it rumbled up the driveway, he lodged no protests. Showed no anger, even though he lost as much sleep as I did. More maybe, because I felt his eyes on me long after I'd settled back to slumber. Blue in the daylight, the muted hues of night turned them to silver coins for the ferryman as he rowed me back to the shores of the living.

Some nights, it was all I could do to cling to those coastlines. "I'm sorry," I once told him. "I came back broken."

Milo shook his head. "No." Ropy arms encircled me. My Orpheus, he should've been a lifeline I could follow to the shore. "Sometimes, though, I'm not sure you came back at all." Instead he'd become an anchor, dragging me deeper beneath the waves.

So that's what I'd become: a ghost haunting my own apartment. *His* apartment. The living shouldn't dwell among the dead.

Shoveling the last of my belongings into my duffel, I zipped up the top and slung the whole thing over one shoulder. Milo used to joke it'd take some kind of divine intervention to get me to pick up after myself. I supposed he wasn't too wrong. Dramatic irony: it'll screw you every time.

"Don't forget these." He tugged open the top drawer of the nightstand and pulled from its depths two heavy black tins. The contents jingled, bell-like in the calm.

For a moment, I could only gape. Why these? Why does every last piece of me need to be purged from this place? Maybe he thought if even some small fraction remained, it'd be a window through which I could return. I could've told him it didn't work that way. There was only one place I haunted, a single vista I saw whenever I shut my eyes. By now, the hot wind would have long since scoured any trace of me from those sands.

We don't haunt places; they haunt us.

Milo was wrong. It's not that I hadn't come back. I'd just brought the war home with me. At night, when the only light flickered in bursts from the dying bulb in our bedroom, when the shadows writhed in kaleidoscope patterns on the walls, everything looked like one of those fractured mosaics in the palace my unit had captured, or maybe just a desert mirage.

In some ways, it'd been easier over there. The only looks we'd exchanged were marred by static, glimpsed through a webcam darkly. We could blame hiccups in the satellite feed for every stilted conversation, every hesitation. No excuses now, just lingering stares as he tried to peer into the world I still scrabbled to leave behind. If they lasted too long, I couldn't say which of us would be the one sucked into that abyss. I'd never forgive myself if it were he.

"Mel?" Milo stared at me, still holding out the medals the way some men would an engagement ring.

I reached out, closing his fingers over the box. "Keep them," I said. Maybe moving out wasn't the same as moving on, but at least it proved I could move at all.