

Cuts Deep

*a silver horn twists
cuts through flesh and facade both
but burns as it sings*

##

“Why did I only get a C+ on this paper? It’s way better than Kyle’s and he got an A.”

I’m in front of the whole class. Hoodie up because I didn’t bother to slick up my hair. Mrs. McCarthy wrinkles her face like she bit into a lemon. Right before she speaks, right before she comes up with some bullshit reason, I crumple the paper in my fist and her eyes flutter back into her head. Just for a split second. You’d miss it if you weren’t looking.

McCarthy says, “Because I have a hard time believing a girl like you can even speak the language properly, let alone that you actually wrote this paper.”

The look of horror builds on her face after she says it.

You can see her racking her brain, trying to reassure herself that she only *thought* those things, that she didn’t say them out loud. But the expressions on everyone else in the class don’t lie, not like she thought she was going to do.

I uncrumple my paper slowly, smooth it out on McCarthy’s desk. Then I use her red Sharpie to turn the C on my paper into a busted-looking A. I turn the paper towards her and place it right in the middle of her desk. Then I turn to sit back down. There’s a moment where I think I won’t say anything else, where I think about the \$20 I already spent on new strings, but then I think fuck it and look back at McCarthy.

“You know I wrote Kyle’s too, right?”

##

Truth hurts, cuts deep. It wounds. But, wielded true, it’s a sharp cut and a sweet pain. And it should salve the misery spread by the funhouse mirrors of falsehood. It should. Sometimes, after truth comes, you wish you could bring back that lying, coruscating gleam.

##

Calloused fingers on frets, lower lip locked firmly between teeth. The amplifier unleashes long, winding notes that arch high and true against the the wood paneling on the walls, the cheap tiling on the floor. I look back and Sindu nods, ready. Her foot pumps and the bass drum is a heartbeat too chaotic to maintain for more than two minutes. We both open our mouths and shout. Together. Perfect unison.

##

I didn't know that I was a unicorn until a bird-rendered-like-a-man sung me my unknown truth. A dark music hall in backwoods Michigan, in a homemade red dress that wished it was a McQueen. Silhouetted against a starry sky and with someone else's bassline pushing its way through the ceiling and into my ribs.

You're not like the others, he told me. You were taken from somewhere else. The chasm in your memories, everything before you woke up in that glade, shrouded by gnarled winter oaks and a noon sky choked with snow-laden pine, is there for a reason. You're not broken. You shine.

"So what?" I'd asked.

I'd just played before dozens in a crowded, sweaty room. My voice was still hoarse from singing my truths at the top of my lungs. And my best friend in all the world was waiting for me to come back from the bathroom so that we could dance until our feet hurt. I might have been broken, but I still shone. And this was not the night to make me feel like I was less than I should be.

It didn't change anything for me until he told me that I had a brother.

##

Merrick, he was called. My brother. Merrick. I practiced saying it, but it still sounded strange on my lips, no matter how often the bird-man told me that we'd grown up together. Until the war. In this place that couldn't exist, where I was really an impossible creature.

The bird-man was called Isidoro. He defied logic and reality. I tried to unbelieve him, at first, but he only had to fly before I realized it was pointless.

Crimson plumage. An errant feather like blood on the snow.

##

I wanted to tell her. I stood in her basement, foot twisting self-consciously at the end of my frayed jeans. A dull whine from the rubber of my Converse against the tile.

“What?” Sindu asked, distracted, adjusting her snare. “Why are you being weird?”

I couldn’t say it. I plucked at the greasy tattered spikes of my hair, pushed them back into place. Arms crossed so hard across my chest it was like I was holding in my guts.

I made an inarticulate sound while I thought of the right way to tell her what I’d learned. What I was.

“I love you,” I said instead. My hand clutched at my mouth, the betrayer.

Sindu is silent. I can’t look away from the shitty nail polish on my thumb, the bit of dirt beneath the nail. The half-healed scab on my knuckle from where I caught it against the wall.

There was a swollen feeling to the air, raw and pink. When Sindu breathed in, words lining up in her trachea, I gripped my arm between my fingers and *pulled*. And instead of whatever she was going to say, Sindu just said, “I know.”

The idea of us being together hung between us like a ghost that had never lived.

##

Sometimes I like to imagine a shadow of this world, where Sindu said, “I love you too.” And we had a lip-chapping make-out session over her drum kit.

The other kids already call us dykes... they just don’t know they’re only half-right. Right now when they talk shit we just glare and walk out, maybe stomp a boot onto an offender’s strappy-sandaled toe.

I picture us walking through school corridors, holding hands, in that orangey horizontal light that comes through sticky and hot through the huge old, almost-transparent windows by the cafeteria. Leaving them in our dust after we graduate. Playing sold-out shows in rad gowns with technicolor hair that we dye different colors each night.

##

It’s only like five minutes on bike from Sindu’s place to mine, the trailer where Dottie and Mike have taken me in. I mean, they get paid for having me there. They’re not saints.

Five minutes isn't long enough. So I leave my bike behind. Walk the long way through the woods. Through the grove where they found me in the trees that day. My breath makes plumes of white that stream from my lips like spirits, half-visible in the flickering street light. I keep my hands in my jean pockets to warm them against my thighs.

There's a hunched over birch that I use to remember where my stash is. A pack of stale smokes and a lighter in a ziplock bag. Only there for emergency purposes.

This feels like an emergency.

##

"I love you. But not...that way," is what she really said.
I knew that already. But still. It cuts deep.

##

Afterward: Band practice. Homework. Smoking in the dark before sneaking into the trailer. School. Band practice. Trying to pretend the songs I wrote now weren't about Sindu. School. Strange meetings with Isidoro. Stopping him from kissing me. Band practice. Wishing things were like what they were before I told her the truth. Saying the name of my brother like a mantra in the grove where I was born like Aphrodite.

Fully formed. No other memories. But maybe Merrick could be a memory?
Band practice.

##

I don't have a horn on my head. Not even a scar where one used to be, some kind of sign. Nothing to show that I'm damaged goods.

##

I meet Paula.

We shouldn't make sense. We don't like anything the same.

But my first kiss, my first not-sure-what-to-do-with-my-hands, my first oh-shit-shut-up-my-mother-might-hear-us -- that was with Paula. It made me forget Merrick, Isidoro. My foster parents and the way we can barely communicate. Almost everything.

“Something’s wrong,” I say to her, us both smoking cigarettes behind the movie theatre. Her kicking a plastic bottle against the wall with more and more force.

She opens her mouth. I try to find something to *pull* on but I have nothing and either way when she says, “You wish I was Sindu,” I know that she’s telling the truth.”

##

I have to see him, I decide eventually. Hands freezing, cupped around the lighter as I frantically work the striker, until I’m wreathed in smoke and white exhalations. He’s in Chicago, Isidoro said.

Chicago is pure fairy tale to me. It’s where everything I’ve ever thought about “the city” goes. Where you go to get lost. Get found. Get caught up in something bigger than this sleepy ass town ever thought of.

The bird-man told me that Merrick has lost his way. Gave me a lock of his hair. There was a look he gave me, when he tried to kiss me. I think he loved Merrick first.

Inhale.

I can find him. I know I can. Even if I have to lose myself to do it.

Exhale. Something inside of me still hopes Sindu comes looking.

But I won’t wait for her to find me.

##

*truth cauterizes
shiny and pink like a shell
marks you, names you hers*