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inger logan

*I'm hopeful because I have no choice.*

*Hope found me lying flat on my back in my room with my thrifted clothes strewn around me like corpses. I found her beneath my fingernails and between my ears. Hope crossed rocks to find me, and I won't forget her in this lifetime.*

*I'd grown tired of the memoirs, the essays, the poems, about hope as a gentle and caring thing. I thought it was something that hid under pebbled coats in clear rivers. I thought it was spindly fingers that clawed at the bark of redwood trees, see-through and only existing if you stared at it long enough for your eyes to hurt.*

*Bombings, war, cancer, screaming, abuse, and I waited for those soft hands to wipe the blood off my neck with a careful glance and a faltering smile. I waited for the moment when the ball would drop and I would finally understand what it meant to be hopeful. There had to be a moment, hadn't there? There always had to be a next moment, when the world stretched into a thin line and hope was condensed into resilience, perseverance, grit. I waited for a light to appear, because surely this was a tunnel, otherwise why was it so dark? Why was there dirt under my fingernails from trying to worm through soil to a place where nobody knew me and nobody told me I was too young to be writing all night until my hands bled? Why did I feel as though my lungs could fill with only ash and metal and fear, why did I feel as though my ribs would burst from the pressure of a thousand iron grooves that dug somewhere I've ignored since I was 7 years old?*

*There was a night. There was always a night. Darkness crept up on me. It was winter—the sun never rose now. I was cold walking home from school, I was cold in the hallways, I was cold as I stared unblinking in the mirror, shivering in my own skin. I didn't recognize my voice, scratchy with something other than winter roughness.*

*There was a night when I laid on my roof and looked at the stars until my eyes began to burn. I waited for an angel to dive into the ocean of black night, to tell me it was okay, that I was beautiful and kind and that I would survive because this was life, after all. There was no easy way out.*

*No angel crawled down from heaven. Perhaps there was a devil, with crooked fingernails and a kind smile. That's the thing they don't tell you about devils; they're kinder than hope ever was. At least they don't pretend to be something they're not and make stories out of sidewalks.*

*I swayed on my feet on the roof and looked down to the deck below. I took one step back, forward, back again, then another, down the stairs, throwing the glass door open, until I was stumbling out onto the deck and I could see the garden below with the tomatoes I used to plant when I went outside. The wood was light under my feet, and it coaxed the jealousy for the ground below out of my heart.*



*I think hope is floorboards.*

*Don't look up to the future; look down beneath your feet and see what keeps you here. That's the thing they don't tell you about hope—it doesn't appear one day in winter cold. It clings to the bottom of your shoes, after all.*

*Maybe hope is the smooth wood under my bare toes as I got out of bed for the first time that day. Maybe hope is the first slice of water down my throat bleeding with thirst and desperation. Maybe hope is the leaves with trembling stems, because they don't know where they'll fall and they choose to anyway.*

*Maybe hope is my mother's shoes in my room, after all. She'll stay another day. She'll sleep in my bed another day. Because that's the thing they don't tell you about hope: hope doesn't stop, not on fractured knees, not on dirt drenched with tears.*

*There might come a day when I don't have hope. There might come a day when my house is leveled to dust and bricks, when my bed is nothing more than a single post wavering on its feet against the destruction, when even my mom has left my room and she no longer stands on the deck with that insufferable hope of hers. She doesn't know that the floorboards saved my life; she doesn't know that the feel of her cup of tea on my palms made me hope for a mug of my own, if only to feel what she felt.*

*Maybe that's why I didn't feel like a person, after all. Everybody I've ever met wanted to be somebody amazing. I just wanted to be somebody.*

*When I was 7 I climbed the tallest oak in my backyard, until my house looked small and my mother, watching from the window, could fit in my palm. My neighbor sat sprawled on one of the highest branches, his limbs draping across the bark until I was sure he was made of twigs. He glanced at me with thinly veiled curiosity. "Why are you up here?" I asked, even though I understood without needing to hear his voice. I wanted to touch the sky, he said. They said my grandfather's up there. Something like grief drenched my chest. He asked me what I was doing in a tree that scraped against the clouds, but what could I say? I just wanted the oranges that peel perfectly under my torn fingertips. I wanted to peel the orange for my mom and see her smile when she took the juice on her tongue and laughed with a kind of devoutness I only understood when she left for the first time.*

*My best friend in 5th grade wanted to be the first female president because she had hope that the girls on the playground wouldn't hide from their fathers forever. Our teacher asked her in that stuttering way of his why she didn't think to pick a more achievable goal, like an astronaut or a doctor or a lawyer. She met me after the bell under the swing I had fallen off of in kindergarten. There was that question again. What do you want to be? I blinked, and I blinked again. "Kind." Neither of us understood what I meant then, until the first time I skipped school lunch because I'd found my backpack overturned like an abandoned child in the classroom corner. Maybe kind wasn't the right response after all, because how could I have a future when the only thing I thought about was the creek behind my old house?*



*The worst part is when people think there's some light at the end of the tunnel. There was never any light; you always needed to make your own, and that's what they never tell you about hope. You take the kerosine you found buried under your old friend and you strike it against your jaw bone, and suddenly there is light where before the maw of darkness stood like a reaper.*

*That's the thing they don't tell you—you'll die here. You'll die in this tunnel, because it always has to be a tunnel, but a tunnel that stretches the length of the earth and is just as wide. You don't make it out of the passage alive, you never do, and what would be the point if you did?*

*Maybe when you take your last breath, some golden figure with wings of waterfalls descends a staircase embedded with jewels that would make a queen faint. Maybe she takes you by the arm and hands you a grin like a bonfire. Maybe she gestures to the world and congratulates you for never giving up. Maybe there's never an end, and we'll be reincarnated forever until we understand at last what it means to be a person.*

*Your fingertips are golden; don't ever forget that.*

*For my part, maybe the world will end tomorrow. But my mint tea is getting cold, I forgot to give my dog his daily spoon of peanut butter, and I have a pile of unfolded laundry on my favorite chair. I'll crumble to dust, of course I will; but I loved the floorboards so much. I loved the wallpaper so much.*

*That's the thing they don't tell you about hope—I am hopeful because in the morning the world could end and the next afternoon I'll wake up on my grandma's bed. She died four years ago, but she'll carry her mug to my side and fold the laundry with me. The sun will laze in patches against her striped blanket and my neck won't throb anymore.*

*I found her on the grooves of wood underneath my feet. I found her in strands of stray hair from her ponytail. I found her in cities that had been burned to the ground, in flakes of ash that left nothing behind but endless, soulless gray. Maybe the world will end, and I'll still be 7 years old and dreaming about a woman with black eyes and hope that didn't fill my skin like loss.*

*The world will end, and I'll carry a lamp in the small place between my ribs that I've ignored since I was 7. I'll step onto the deck and I'll look into the stars and not wish to be in the sky for once, because the ground is perfectly fine as long as you walk on your own two feet. I'll die with your name on my tongue and your hope on my lips.*

*It'll be enough for me, anyway.*