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Harbor Lied

Nick Vasquez

On dark shores under stormy skies many have passed into flowing seas. It's the time of night where those still awake are four of society's orphans; an artist sitting in solitude contemplating her place; a merchant whose numbers drown out past regrets; a couple staying in love to avoid dying alone; and a poet wandering the streets lost and forgotten. From the mast of a fishing sloop a sailor serenades the town with his violin. Other fishermen join with a chorus of deep humming and melodic drumming. Together they sing to the town a sequence of vignettes.

I.

On a hilltop above the city sits a woman with easel and canvas. The moon sits caged behind the iron bars of pallid clouds. She sketches the scene before her; houses wrapped in darkness, stars nestled in the night's womb, and silhouetted forest canopies yearning for pinpricks of light rising from the town below. She stirs as the violin reaches her ears and marvels at the ease in which it switches from F minor to B minor, a technique she could never fully grasp. It wraps her heart in a cocoon of her own loneliness and a quiet, passive acceptance of fate. Vibrato flourishes the moon with wisping brushstrokes, a method the artist developed to accentuate movement. The woman looks back at her painting and mourns for the artistic career she once dreamt of before being expelled from the academy for masquerading as a man. Since then, her only reprieve is on nights like these to find a hilltop and paint the city below. She hopes for her art to one day be recognized for its merit and not the femininity of the artist: the shape of her face, the length of her legs, the curves of her hips. A thought crosses her mind to run away tonight and start over somewhere new. She quickly dismisses it. Once when she was younger, she would have acted upon the idea. But her diminishing youth weans her from such ideas as it does the possibility of succeeding as an artist. Forte cracks the sky as sailor voices hum with the trembling violin. The artist cleans up her canvas and takes the long way back into town.

II.

In the halls of a local guild a man sits by candle light still in his dark cloak. His wrinkled hand scratches the brim of his nose where his glasses rest while he tallies the day's profits and losses. His grey hair darkened by shadows elongates wrinkles where his eyes have withered in drought. Dirge opens the window behind him and whispers in his ears. The man sits up, removes his glasses, and closes his eyes letting the violin hold him. It stirs memories of youthful days with wife and child, when happiness wasn't an abstract concept only found in books, and his spirit stirred

with compassion for downtrodden souls like himself. His eyes close as the violin whispers past arguments. With a gradual tonal shift comes the day she walked away. He reminisces a past full of regrets, of burying himself in bottles of numbers and figures to forget his sorrow. His spirit stirs and he longs once more to know happiness and love and to rejoin humanity before the weeping music sweeps across his desk, reminding him that his age brings permanent loneliness. He stands and looks at the night sky. The moon is shrouded in pallid clouds. The streets are empty. A woman carrying a canvas slips between buildings and disappears. He closes the window and pours himself a cup of belladonna tea.

III.

Riding about brick walls into a bedchamber, the violin's *Lacrimosa* moans to a couple grieving their stillborn child. Thunder lets out a mournful peal. Fog devolves to mist devolves to rain. A woman brings her hands to her face, wiping tears from swollen bloodshot eyes. She moves to the window and wraps her hand around the drapes, pausing to watch a woman with a canvas wind her way through cobblestone streets. Her husband lays on the bed with his head buried beneath calloused palms, his body writhing and wrenching with every heaving sob. Lullaby stirs from the empty crib reminding them of songs they'd often sing to soothe their kicking child. The music's tonal tension and melodic dysfunction reminds them of their past together, how once they had loved each other, how they could never quite live up to their ideas of each other or of being in love, and how they had hoped a child would bring them closer. A soft blanket of loneliness creeps over the room smothering the cradle song and violin, leaving the young couple to sit in darkness, too afraid to walk away.

IV.

Wandering the streets, a man drifts between street lamps, unseen and unheard. Abandoned by family and stranded in this small town alone, he resigns himself to a fate of solitude. He pauses to listen to the violin singing to him, speaking truth to his every thought and feeling. It picks up intensity, crying, begging the man to reconsider his passive acceptance of fate. He walks down the streets,

Author's note: A Lied (pronounced *leed*) is a style of German music that sets poetry to music, typically a single violin or piano. It was commonly used in the Romantic period to invoke feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, and sadness.

saddened by the violin's minor thirds and flattened sevenths giving voice to his melancholy, his groans of misery and longing for a friend. He remembers a friend from years past who had once understood him just as the violin does tonight. Since her passing he has wandered hoping to rekindle something, a joy or purpose to keep him going. In his pack lay notebooks full of unpublished poetry, untouched since that day. Each step takes him closer to her. He walks absorbed in his thoughts before bumping into a woman carrying a canvas and brushes. They pass a smile

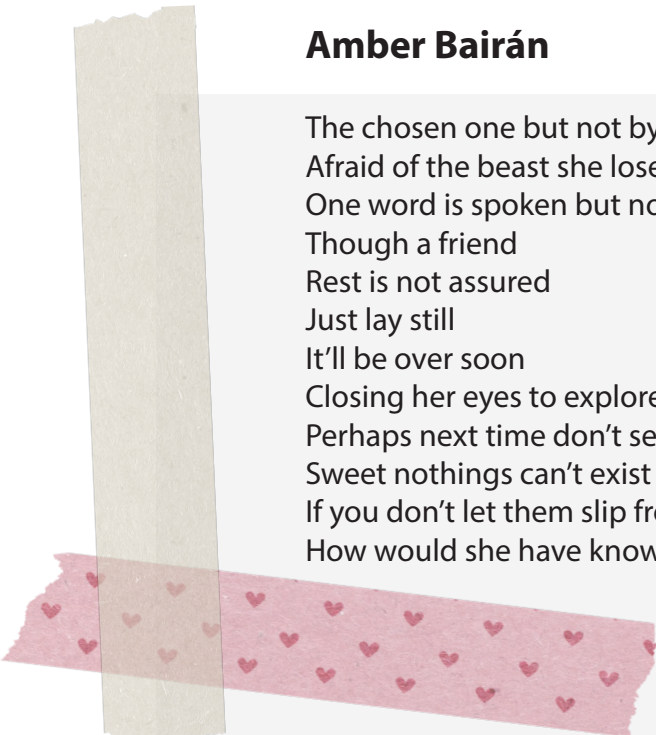
and exchange a few words. He helps her gather her things and they continue on their separate ways.

Back on the sloop, the fishermen finish their song. From their lips comes a tale of seafaring when cod ran cold and seaward roads ran south. They sing for their captain, an artist whose legacy once was bound to portray the lives of society's orphans, forgotten dregs at the bottom of the glass called normal.

Content warning: This piece contains reference to sexual assault

Broken Promise

Amber Bairán



The chosen one but not by choice
Afraid of the beast she loses her voice
One word is spoken but not heard
Though a friend
Rest is not assured
Just lay still
It'll be over soon
Closing her eyes to explore the moon
Perhaps next time don't seal broken promises with a kiss
Sweet nothings can't exist
If you don't let them slip from your lips
How would she have known she was just a kid