

## Flower

Two little black eyes scanned over the swirl of faceless ghosts. Nope, he thought, no one familiar. Had he been surprised or had there been even the possibility he would recognize anyone, his bony shoulders would have risen up for the simple pleasure of collapsing back down. Mind going over motion, he imagined his chest contracting as the air holding him aloft rushed out of his body in a short burst from his mouth and nostrils. After thinking about the feeling for only a moment he decided he might as well give it a try, see if he remembered how. Somewhere deep inside the thin frame, his diaphragm expanded downward, his undersized chest flooded with air, and the two sharp corners of his body rose, if only but an inch. Then, in one satisfying, exhilarating release, he let it all go. A perfect sigh.

His pitted eyes closed and the little boy smiled to himself. After a second or so, the eyelids peeled open and the smile disappeared. The black retinas skimmed through the crowd once more, searching the faceless ghosts over and over. No more sighing though, once had been gut wrenching enough, the air leaving a bad taste in his lungs. So no more sighing. And no more smiling; the ghosts didn't like it.

They didn't like a lot of things.

All of a sudden his head started to scream. Rattling, thundering, crashing, banging, screeching, squealing filled his skull. Thoughts of ripping off his ears to rid himself of the sound flashed through his mind. The blood, the pain, it would be better than this, it had to be, just to make it stop, it needed to stop, the sound had to end.

A second later the subway train lay at rest before him.

The young boy took a deep breath, trying not to taste the air. It didn't work.

Replacing the thunder of metal, the murmur of ghosts eased into the space around him, growing thicker, suffocating him, choking away every molecule of air. He was used to it by now.

Here it comes, he thought to himself, the best part. The first few times the process had revolted him, made him feel dirty, trapped, out of control. By the fourth time he used the subway, however, he found a sick sense of enjoyment in all of it, the rush, the chaos. With a slight smile, small enough that the non-existent faces would never notice, the little boy let go of the world, his feet lifting off the platform, arms rising just a few degrees up from his sides. Half a second later, he felt himself propelled forward, the ghosts weaving around him, under him, caressing him, gripping and carrying him. Like a wave from the empty world, they swept him into the train. As quickly as his smile had formed, his feet landed on the ground once more and the smile was gone.

He took another deep breath. Strangely enough, crowded with ghosts, the air didn't taste quite as appalling. No room for the bad air to get in.

It was always at this point that he was no longer sure what to do. It was a twenty-minute ride from here to the end of the line and all he could do was wait, unmoving, afraid he was stealing room away from the ghosts. When the exhilaration of floating along their momentum gone, the child became small, as he always did, shrinking and hiding among the faceless nothings.

At each stop, as the thundering shrieks penetrated the muffling enclosure of the crowd, he simply looked through the nearest window. Beyond, he watched them move, eddying, dancing, swirling, fighting, mixing. Some left the train, and others took their place. His eyes drank in the elegant chaos. The comings and goings were sad,

uneventful, meaningless, and filled him with uneasiness and a sense of a mournful emptiness. Nothing danced through nothing, and nothing mixed with nothing. Even their non-existent faces would have shown a morbid barrenness. Every station was crowded, bustling, loud, throbbing, stuffed with hollow existence and void of life.

The grey train hid amongst grey stations in the color-drained world. He traveled with his small eyelids locked fast over his sight, hands clamped over his ears as the vacant abyss which others called existence became nothing but the silent rocking of an invisible train through the blackest of tunnels.

On his invisible train, in the pitch-black tunnel, all he could do was count the stops. Two more, he told himself. He drew air in through his nostrils, filling his lungs. The subway was nearing the end of the line, fewer ghosts occupied the compartment and the bad air was beginning to seep in. Almost there, he whispered to himself.

Finally, the soft rocking came to an end and he opened his eyes. He was alone. No more ghosts filled the train with nothingness. Now it was only him.

In silence, the boy left the train, he left the station, and a short while later he left the city. The last terminal resided only a two-minute walk from the city limits. He did not hesitate. He did not stop. Without thinking, he continued past the last few buildings, great, grey, unfilled rectangles stretching up to the sky.

The city was flat, yet outside its limits, the ground became uneven. Barren, lifeless hills decorated the landscape. The little boy did not pause and ponder where to go, his feet had long since known the way, perhaps they always had. Three minutes outside the city, they began to climb up the side of a large hill.

Breathing harder, he found the foul taste no longer coated his throat and lungs.

The air was better here.

At the top of the hill, he came to a stop and sat down, legs crossed under him. Before the child, emerging from the earth, was a single blue flower. The boy withdrew a bottle from his jacket pocket, sloshing the water inside. Carefully, as if a single wrong move would erase the scene forever, he unscrewed the lid and poured the liquid around the flower's stem. As the earth turned dark with moisture, he watched the water seep into the dirt, diving towards the crying thirst of the plant's miniscule roots.

It was then, and only then, he truly let himself smile. Not the smile of a proud gardener, or a smile meant only to put others at ease. Not any smile the ghosts could understand, not any smile they would tolerate. It was a simple smile, a beautiful smile. It was the smile of a little boy admiring a flower.