**Paper Town**

Jasmina Kuenzli

The town was made of paper. It blew away with the first breath of wind, and if you tugged a little too hard, you could rip it from its foundations. When it rained, the whole thing bled darker as the water spread through it, and then it was gossamer, so fragile that you could blow it down in a whisper.

I used to be part of that town. When I was growing up, I didn’t know about the paper—everything was explained away when I hit a wall a little too hard and went straight through it, when I got angry, and half a door crumpled up in my hand. The windows, after all, were still the same. Open and close, climb through into the star-strewn night.

I was young; I was just a kid. I didn’t care about what the houses looked like; I cared about the asphalt street, the big green fields, the forest sweeping me down toward the river, where I used to pretend that I was on some secret mission, ready to save the world or break it apart entirely.

When it rained, my parents would put their backs up against their walls and their fingers up toward the ceilings. All of us used to talk about it at school—the way the teachers would use all the class time to focus on the storm, on the wind and rain. On the way it used to smell before the sun came out, musty and startling, the way it made us sneeze.

The way if you looked closely, it seemed like the walls were drooping in. Like the whole school or house or grocery store was taking a giant sigh of relief, or defeat.

The colors would run.

But when the sun came out, it was all back to normal. All the little wrinkles soon ironed out. The holes in the wall, patched.

And we didn’t realize that paper was fragile until we left and found things that weren’t. Found out the effort and cost and price of keeping our world so innocent and flimsy—liable to be washed away with the easiest strike from the elements, with the first brush of violence.

We didn’t realize it until we grew up, moved away, and put away childish things.

I think of my paper town all the time. When I’m walking through this one, trying to get groceries before I get too tired to stand, when I’m in my own classroom, watching water drip through the hole in the ceiling, listening to the roar of the air conditioner and the distant sound of thunder.

When I think I have peace, I think of the paper town.

I think about how I still used to visit it for so long, and my mother’s house was still the same. How she hung pictures on the flimsy walls and covered up the rot with essential oils and prayer. How religion was like its own paper tower, erected in the middle of the dining room, Christ on his cross hanging over her heart. How she used to hold him in her hands, solid and unyielding, when everything gave out beneath her.

I think about how, even when the paper had become truly nothing to me, even when I knew that I could rip that house from its foundation, I never did. Because I loved it, and the town, and my mother, who held us all together with stitches and sweat and glue.

But one day death took a blowtorch and sent it all up in flames. And I was left standing outside the wreckage, with the paper ambulances and the paper police, and when the water bled through them, I saw exactly what they were. They were just like the paper house, once the flames had died. All blood and ash.

And I didn’t have anything to stitch together anymore. My brother went up north to live in a place made of real brick and mortar, and I moved into an apartment with concrete floors and twinkling lights up in the corners, to chase out the shadows. I still write words on paper and string them along my bedroom walls—poetry and prose like little lanterns in the oncoming darkness. They burn against a hell that comes for all.

But the place isn’t a home. And the sunlight filtering through the window doesn’t create the patterns the paper used to. And I think, just because something is made solid doesn’t mean it will last forever. After all, the faith in the paper was solid, and the words were spellcasts of eternity.

And something broke them eventually.

Something always breaks.