**Farewell and Return to Thistles**

Melanie Steger

“Tell me,” I crooned, settled on the edge of his bedside where he’d begged for my attendance during the loneliest moments of the night. “Tell me about home.”

He shivered beneath the sky-blue blanket the nurses had tucked around his emaciated frame. It was the only shade of color in the room that wasn’t easily identifiable with death. The white of the peeling walls was dry and corpse-like. The blinds were a coffin-sort of mahogany. It made one wonder what they were attempting to accomplish, the care facility. Was this how they desensitized their patients to the fact their lives could only now dwindle with the slow, impartial trickle of time?

“There were mountains,” he croaked between ashen cracked lips, gray eyes fastened to the ceiling. “So many mountains.”

“And?” I prompted, tracing blanket wrinkles with the tip of a finger. They made their own sorts of mountain peaks, the fabric folds. How similar were they, I wondered, to those slopes and ridges the old man was imagining now?

“Water pooled between them, narrow lochs of freezing run-off.”

“What color?”

“Always the sky. Like the water had reached out and drawn it close in an embrace.”

The drowsy image tugged closed my eyes as I sprawled across the foot of the bed. “How poetic.”

“Poetry,” he echoed. “I’d always wanted to write something about the land. Something meaningful.”

I turned my head to survey him. “Why didn’t you?”

“I never knew how to make it matter. The scents of rain and soil, the moss-cloaked rocks, the wind’s howls…” His sunken eyes were nearly swallowed by the wrinkles of his brows, his cheeks. And still did smoldering embers burn in the gray. “Why are you here?”

“You called for me.” I tapped his foot. “Do you recall?”

“No,” he murmured, troubled. “What did I say?”

“You said you were tired of all this,” I gestured lazily to the room. “You said you didn’t want to choke on any more pills or bruise from another IV needle.”

“So you came to ease an old man’s mind?” The sentiment tickled the edges of his mouth, rousing the barest of smiles.

“No. I came because you asked to be with Doris again.”

He jolted at the admission, and I refrained from smirking, years having taught me how the expression would be perceived in moments such as these.

“Doris? But she’s dead,” he said.

“I know.”

“Does that mean I’m…”

“Yes.”

“And you’re?”

“Yes.” I propped myself up to face him fully. “Does that scare you?”

Wonderment lit his eyes as he absently shook his head. “Is she waiting for me?”

“I don’t know. What happens beyond… it’s not really any of my concern.”

“So where am I going?”

“Why, home, of course.” Standing, I stretched, pops and crackles cascading down my spine, and extended my hand to him. “Come.”

He stared at me unmoving, shaking hands clasped in his lap. “Heaven?” he asked.

I chuckled. “Of course not. There’s no such thing. No, we’re going to your mountains.”

His hand rose, hanging limply in the air between us, before extended fingers caught my own in a childish hold. There was that small jump as his skin registered the glacial temperature of my own, but he did not draw away.

“Is it always this peaceful?” he asked as I led him from the bed. “The end?”

“Not always.” I glanced back at the body he’d left behind, head lolling despondently to the side. He hadn’t even noticed disengaging from the warm fleshy cocoon that had sheltered him for so long. “And usually, I don’t make it a priority to lead you either.”

“No?”

We shambled along the vacant hall, the tentative nature of his steps causing me to wonder how long it’d been since he’d last walked, last seen anything beyond the walls of his room. He clutched so desperately to my arm.

“No,” I repeated.

“Then why make an exception tonight? My mountains, they’re not really so special. Not in the ways of grander ones. When I was a child, all I dreamed of was the vast Andes. Their peaks rip into the clouds. Can you imagine?”

“I could, but I’m not interested. I want to breathe your poetry. See it. Touch it.” I glanced at him as we approached the double metal doors at the ward entrance. “Will you write about them, please? Now that you’ve all the time to lament on your words.”

“I think I could do that, yes. In fact,” he didn’t seem to notice how the drab night colors were draining away from us, streaks of light rushing forward in eager embrace, “I think I’ve already got a title.”

“Oh? Do share.”

“Farewell and Return to Thistles.”