

Ode to a Morning Star

The three of us sit around the lamppost's pedestal where we set the box down. It's Friday morning in a park in Santa Monica two days succeeding Kim's birthday. We open the box of Sidecar doughnuts Oleg treated us to in celebration of this turning, and, while we talk in and about short stories and tore chunks of different flavored doughnut from the box, a funeral is taking place across the street inside the chapel. We only know because of the pipers, men wielding bagpipes, standing outside. They're dressed in button adorned black coats and red tartan kilts. A signal of mourning, I suppose. Meanwhile, in this park there are sleeping homeless, family picnics, tennis players, wanderers, trash, and, well, *us*.

I had just reconnected with Kim this last month when she asked me to be her studio assistant and furthermore the first intern working for her business Catalyst Muse. Oleg I was seeing for the first time in many years that morning. We had all met at the Topanga Library five years ago, in a time when there were dreams of a literary festival and those committed to realize it. We're former fellow committee members of a great literary exposition, and consequently friends. We sniff out the writing which hangs in the air like... a wet blanket.

Someone had been speaking, though it wasn't me, when the gentlemen begin to play their bagpipes. From my poor, low angle I glimpse a procession beginning at the chapel doors. The pipers keep their distance from the grief-stricken yet serenade them with the casket in their clutches. The minor wheeze of the bagpipes, hoarse skynascent breaths, whips the wet blanket at my gut. It hits me just then: the traditional woodwind of Scotland, and I begin to think of another three.

She's leaving too, in only a couple days. Sitara, a friend who had been one first, in a creative writing class we took together. Before I knew Kim or Oleg I had mounted my word-for-word alongside Sitara, whose 'alongside' is a breezy mountain drive. She's one of those friends who simply was one, as if we were already, but neither of us knew it until, at once, we did. Almost like not registering that someone you love is about to embark until the land she's leaving for chimes in when you least expect it. I have to chew on that with doughnut in my mouth, the sweetness never leaving, but now Oleg's telling us about his 250-word entry for a short story prompt that is simply "Salt." The pipers' playing doesn't really sound sad, however the doughnuts feel like they were lodged in my throat on our walk back.

The year Sitara and I found each other, her, Natalie and I united and the greatest friend folly I have began. One by one we remembered we were angels, though Sitara

was the original. Maybe that's why I'm in the park this morning, to attend the service, why the pipers are here too. I'm dreadfully excited for Sitara to study at the University of Edinburgh, to live in the UK, to delight herself with the world and help it along. I know she's been waiting for an adventure like this for a long time, and it pains me in the most admiring way to say goodbye. The truth: I admire her. The truth: I'm proud of her. The truth: I miss her. The truth: I love her.

I can see her now, getting everything ready to fly with her parents across the pond. She's saying goodbye to her bedroom, to her house. They've gotten so close over the years. She's saying goodbye to the moon from her window, the flashes of light in the sky, the mosquitos that never tire of biting her. She'll go to LAX, pass through TSA, scout for her gate, sit down and look out the walls of glass to see the aircraft that will take her there. She'll get on the plane, her and her parents sharing the row. As she secures herself in her seat with the entertainment she'll have at the ready – a book, a playlist, a journal – a girl much younger than her will sit down in a nearby row. She'll see her parents but lock onto angelic Sitara, one of a kind. She'll see the pieces of star in her hair and smile. The smile also gives her permission to cry, though she can't find a good reason for it, neither sweet nor salt. The silent stream of tears and acknowledging smile stretch this girl's face into the most sublime euphoria. She's flying with an angel.