

Once There Was A Man

by A. M.

She landed. Her feet cut through the air with grace. And she landed. The way time had stopped and gone back to history. She arced over the ground and froze as if in a Dali.

Everything was colorless. Only darkness and light played. Only the whites. And the black of Bast. With pupils of light gleaming at you in sudden flight. The curtains fluttered on the stage. The wooden floor felt damp and soft as if the years had seeped into it and had come out as stains. The lights hung low and dim, bulbous and suspended from nowhere. They threatened to fall, blow, break and unleash darkness. But they hung, low and dim.

There sat one man. His body sinking into itself with the bones coming up for breath. He sat there on his cold chair, the chair wobbling slightly. Sharp and stinging, punishing his body for every second that he rested on it. He seemed to be rocking it with dry, heavy gasps. The light above him made him sweat. You could see his glistening forehead, hair sticking to his scalp and his eyes blinded, with shame or guilt no one knew. His face, masked with beard as his armor gave nothing away. One couldn't gauge the depth of the abyss into which he was falling. Not even by the words that were churning in his mind, waiting to be spilled and tapped.

The typewriter before him lay rusted, vestigial. The paper on which it squatted had acquired age and color. And the inkwells had begun to dry at the neck. Papers with words and lines striking each other off littered the ground beneath his table. He seemed to have written and re-written the words before letting any key hit a letter onto the paper rolled into his typewriter. The ashtray was nearing fullness, with loose strands of smoke coming from deep within. He had abandoned the habit long back. Had abandoned it like he would abandon a wanton woman.

The old man pierced the silence with his bow and let one note creep into the hall. He sat there composed, at peace with the monochrome synchrony. It was mournful and flat on the surface.

Deep within you knew the music would spring forth and engulf you with a sense of mellowness and leave you floating within. He played with a serenity found in those ready to face death. He knew nothing of the man on the stage above him. Yet you couldn't now see the man when all you could hear was that tune.

It swallowed those little globes of burning white. You no longer saw the old man and him. The bleak disappeared and gave in to snow. The square looked deserted. The grey man pointed at somewhere in the horizon. No one paid him any heed. There was no one to do so. He trudged along, his shoes making a squelching noise. His brown long overcoat made him look like an orphaned rat. He stopped before the town hall, a construction of mortar and bricks amassing the lives and glory of his times into its arena. He watched the one lone tree still blooming and breathing, with its flowers falling in a hush.

It broke loose from the tree, aided by a slight gust of wind. He looked into the mirror, saw it swaying and tilting with the breeze till it broke the glass boundaries. He looked at her with tenderness and fear. He feared he would lose his life to this fear, or her. He wanted to hold on to her and beg and plead. He would erase his past and forget his memories for her. He wanted to surrender. And then fear gripped him again. He turned away to look out of the window. He could hear her turning on the bed. He knew her hair had fallen over her face and how her breath brushed those strands before escaping into the sunlight. He remembered how they breathed into each other and he could hear their hearts thudding against bones and time.

He watched as the tree shook and shed some more blossoms, like feathers gushing into air from a pillow. They fell like snow. He felt cold and wanted to go and lie down next to her. Feel her softness melt into warmth and the memory of her scent threatened to overwhelm him. He turned to the coat hanger, put on his shirt and coat and walked to the door. He pulled the door close and saw her eyes opening slightly, giving away a silent plea to stop. And the door

shut upon his face, the brass knocker a shamelessly festive embellishment. It stood out against the chipped black paint.

And then there was the sky, lit up with golden fountains. They rose and burst, into rhythmic patterns and colorful beats. Into green and red light. Into a swirl of spring flowers and summer fires. It all went too fast, all too soon. The sun rose at different times and went to sleep at its own whims. Rooms opened, beds creaked, mirrors broke and doors shut. Letters read were tossed into a heap and burnt. Everything went by in a blur.

Time was heading into a hurricane, sweeping everything that came its way. The figures pirouetted and spun. They danced with calm and a furious wildness. He burst into the hall. And they kept spinning. And she landed. The way time had stopped and gone back to history. His loud footsteps fell into beat with the orchestra. She arched over the ground as if frozen in a Dali. He ran up to the stage and shot. She fell slowly to the ground. Blood gushed out like a spray of red poppies and time hung, suspended. The music rose to a crescendo, a woman screamed and she fell, like a doll dropped from a high tower, folded and crumpled on the stage.

He saw the ink spill, words entangled within the trail of streams it was spreading, scarring everything it touched. As he watched it burn and bleed, he cried. He felt the walls falling over him, breaking over him. He cried and struggled at the shackles on his limbs. He shook and flailed. He begged and pleaded for her to come back. The old man's bow woke up his sleeping nightmares. Yet he played, unawares.

And there sat one man. Searching for words and solace. The silence returned and the colors peeled off from the walls. Darkness returned with fledgling light. He threw back his head and filled the emptiness with his laugh. He laughed in mirth and in misery. He dug a half-smoked roll of tobacco and lit it, handcuffs notwithstanding. He inhaled deeply and let out a cloud of ghosts. He heard the windows bang against their frames and felt cold breeze against his wet cheeks. He looked up at the light and started typing out his story.

And he sold it off for peace.

