

The Zen Garden

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There's something sour and pestilent about the spicy smell in the air, it entwines into your skin with its bite- chipping at this and that, your nails with ridges like a

Zen garden.

It's the smell of 1976, every Sunday night; your black church shoes dangling, red vinyl stools, and that song about wasting away in Margaritaville. The men had bad teeth but they smiled anyway, slapping your honey-on-gravel mother's emaciated thigh with their cement city street palms. *Don't work at a diner*, she told you; *bad people, bad pay – it does things to you*. You liked warm lemonade and coloring with worn pencils in that same coloring book; you remember your bony knees dug into Grandpa's back that one time at Disneyland. You remember lots of things, but what you don't remember is that your mother loved you.

You look towards the source of the smell – a pink haired old lady I swear I've seen doing drugs on Telegraph, riding up to scrape the sky. *Get off the fucking elevator, ya damn rank hippie*, you mutter. You file papers on the 48th floor and when you collapse in bed at night you are ready for the empty space between the spaces between your atoms, this disease of numbness, to metastasize- to explode, to let you feel. You are layers of sandpaper, roughing up the air around you, rubbing us raw, and what you didn't realize when the sweet ding of the door opening came, and you walked out, was that you rubbed a little too hard and made someone bleed. She leaned up against the cold metal of the cold elevator of the cold building, sliding to the floor. I watched with tender eyes, wanting to reach down and help. But everyone shook their heads, no, and as I looked away from her shivering body, the strings of the instrument of my soul tightened, and the note they played was sharp. I could hear words being scratched into the emptiness of her sigh, and they told me just how

painful it was to realize that no one, not in the entire world, cared if you lived or died.

We have much in common, she says to the space where you once were standing, and sits there on the floor, feeling the weave of the elevator rug, all the wrong colors, with her fingers, burnt skin stretched tight over the bone. She wants to slip through its ridges, like the ones of a

Zen garden.

You're beautiful, she tells me, when I am walking home, alone on the demanding street, *you have dreads like an African Princess, hold them up high, be proud- you are royalty*. I smile at her, and wonder if she remembers the elevator, the way I had betrayed her for dignity I hadn't even wanted; from people I didn't know, didn't want to know, whose upturned noses made me sicker than any odor. I want to tell her I'm sorry. But the words that come out are, *I like your hair too*.

It's okay, she tells me, *at least you care...I forgive you...*

I'm nervous, and I wipe my hands on my pants; corduroys, with ridges like a

Zen garden.

Bright sun shines like a halo around her head, my eyes squint, trying to comprehend the image in front of me. She's beautiful, with the same kind of magic as an illustration to a fairytale, but grimy, and withered, and gray. She smells like green tea and cigarettes, and flyaway silver hair frames her face- darkened and made granular by the sun like a badly focused photograph. I think of you, in your office, filing your papers... what would you say? You'd say *I don't know what you're talking about* – you'd try to hide your feelings, pass it off like you didn't have any... you must have some, you must have some, or where's *my hope??*

I'm sorry... I whisper, and she puts her cigarette out in the unpleasantness of the makeshift ashtray by the bus stop, drawing ridges in it like a

Zen garden.

Hug me, she whispers... and I want to, because I'm thinking of you, and how you wouldn't... and I want to, because she looks so alone, standing there, people walking around her, ignoring her... do they

always ignore her like that? And I want to, because it's been a while since I've been hugged... So I do. Feeling her sunken chest, she's so skinny, I can reach my arms around her... I feel her bones, delicate; I could crush them into pixie dust... I step back, afraid that I will... I step back, just in time to see her fade into the crowd, and the sun, and the colors; just in time to hear the words in her quiet sigh thank me with the purest calm that I've ever witnessed... A calm you can reach only by playing with a
Zen garden.