

## *Tesserae*

We collected the stones. We scraped them from the ashy ground, charred as they were. We brushed them clean and held them in our fingers. Under thin linoleum, light, we parsed at their colors, pieced them together.

Together we managed to salvage four fragmented pieces. Tiles, we called them. Artists had worn them smooth and polished, once, but time had returned to claim them as her own. Hands other than ours, the hands of wind and war, had cracked and peeled their surfaces. Glass collapsed to sand, to dust and rock.

They rested on our table, quiet. Hundreds of years since they were allowed to scream their colors bright and true. Instead they spoke in green-shaded whispers, a darkening of blue, maybe, a fleeting glow of crystal white. We found them mingling among themselves; perhaps in all their time anchored to a wall, they had never witnessed the colors just ten stones away, only their same neighboring shades, so close to their own.

We handled them with gloves, afraid they might come undone if touched by skin. But a thousand hands might have touched this mural, in a holy city. A thousand might have pressed their thumbprints for a bit of luck, a bit of blessing. We wanted to touch them, in unforgiving nights, and steal some of the luck ourselves. We wanted to join the thousand, the blind woman wrapped in shawls, the child under his mother's watch, the old man wishing for harvest, the serving girl, kneeling beneath the sheen of mosaic.

Four, just four, we had rescued from the rubble—rescued, we told ourselves. They were only glass tiles, only history's left-behind rubbish, ripe for our taking. Well, we couldn't help ourselves, could we? And the cracked urns, and the pitchers, and the hooks and hairpins and rotten cloth. We saved it all, we think. We told ourselves we deserve these things. Because if we hadn't been there, with our claws all thick in the dirt, pawing at the gravesite, these stones would have perished, crushed to splinters, ground into true dust. Nature would have had her way. So we let ourselves take, and cross oceans, or straits, and whispered the objects back into life, one thousand miles from where they used to breathe.

On the wooden floors of our adulthood, we laid the tiles in lines, swapped them back and forth. We cast lights on them stranger than the sun they knew, and we tallied them in lists on screens that gleamed just as bright. We held them close to ourselves, and rearranged their shapes to fit against ours. We guessed, we estimated. We imagined. We were searching for the image they might have formed, thousands of years ago, when they shone bright and new. The curve of a woman, maybe, the blessed glint of a savior, the dull expanse of the background. Yet we held only four. And so we couldn't find the image, never the image, the exact shape of it.

But the story, oh the story. The story we could tell.