

A PHANTOM PAINTER'S PAINTINGS

VINURADI

I dreamt of stars each and every night: they shone so bright, far from sight, seraphic and wild. I wondered if I would get to hold one.

No, I knew, so I woke up and painted, on a soulless canvas that brought these sparklings to life, and thrived, which would have to be enough, knowing I will never reach them.

Born from my yearning, crafted by my hand, that was my first painting.

The bungalow, named Fernleigh, was hollow evermore, an empty shell, no matter how many were present to fill its presence. You could float around the eerie rooms, noticed yet unnoticed. I remembered the first day I arrived there with my family, clinging to my father's hand. 'Home,' he said. 'Home,' I believed.

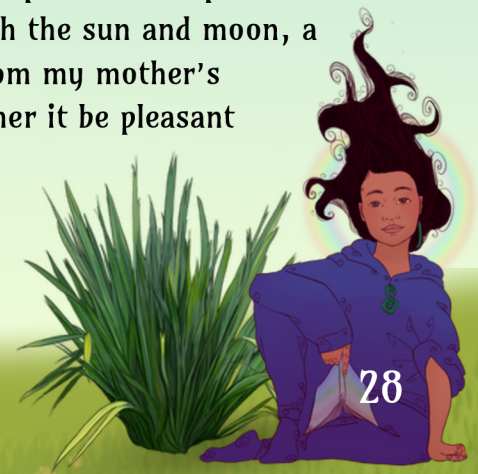
My mother was an invisible artist; she sang and danced, but no one would see her or hear her. I started with simple shapes, such as circles and triangles, which evolved into faces and gazes that I could not avoid. She was my first muse, I was her only admirer, I drew because I wanted to remember how her tangled hair swayed, dancing along with her as she sang.

As time passed, my father's acres of fields continued to grow, tea plantations sprinkled like viridescent veils over umber-hued mountains that played with the sun and moon, a sonder view I brought to the tip of my paintbrush. Moving on from my mother's whimsicality, I stepped into a reality I have warmed up to, whether it be pleasant or not.

My mother was an invisible artist; she sang and danced, but no one would see her or hear her. I started with simple shapes, such as circles and triangles, which evolved into faces and gazes that I could not avoid. She was my first muse, I was her only admirer, I drew because I wanted to remember how her tangled hair swayed, dancing along with her as she sang.

As time passed, my father's acres of fields continued to grow, tea plantations sprinkled like viridescent veils over umber-hued mountains that played with the sun and moon, a sonder view I brought to the tip of my paintbrush. Moving on from my mother's whimsicality, I stepped into a reality I have warmed up to, whether it be pleasant or not.

Then, I adored fond memories of ivory Frangipani, crimson Champak, and sky-hued Blue Water Lily, which enamoured our garden with a rich fragrance outmatching the roses my mother



brought with her, of the delicate winged butterflies enchanted by the alluring silkiness of petals, and of him, the gardener's son...

The first glimpse of him was when we were children; he, too, clung to his father's hand, terrified. "Home?" he asked. His father said nothing; quiet was the mouse. We were too young to know, to not know.

His home was taken away by us, by my people, who came to his land and acted like it was theirs, who thought of him, his people, as savages. I did not, I could not. But that would not make me any better, for I watched and did nothing.

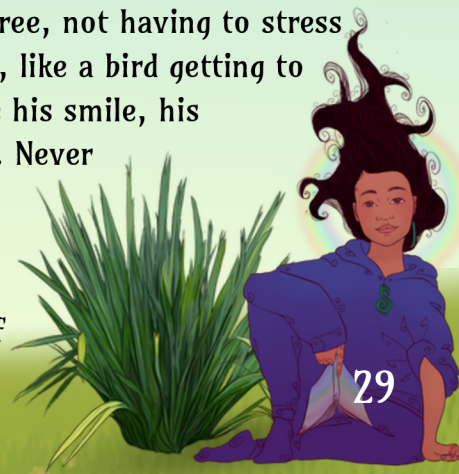
The second glimpse of him was when we knew much better, of right and wrong, of wanting to flee, but with broken legs, of wanting to scream, but having glued lips. He would work on the garden, helping his father, who was playing a close game with Death, old age dulling his cunning.

I did not know his name, but I knew how his obsidian curls whispered to the wind, falling to cover his earthly gaze, how his sun-kissed skin bathed in the sun, and how his calloused hands caressed the soil, crooked teeth alabaster, charming his smile. Pages and pages were filled with him, until the mineral in my pencils would run out, and he would bring me new ones, not knowing it was he whom I wanted to paint.

On a stormy day in December, I mustered my courage, and onto his little house I floundered. He did not speak my language, and I did not speak his. It took me longer than I thought to make him understand that I wish to paint him, to have him be my model, my muse. He stared at me for a few seconds, his eyes held mahogany, bronzed dusk, and woodsmoke. His ash-touched lips twitched as if wanting to smile, but then they dropped, which bruised my heart. He nodded, and I seized the opportunity to take his hand in mine, Coir meeting Kapok, guiding him to the bleak house. Like a star, he shone.

For months, I tried to capture the perfect imperfection that he was, a cracked vase of striking beauty, a blind archer's perfect arrow in a misty meadow. I ran out of paint, spilled greens and blues on my face, which went to waste. The brushes broke, got bent, or the ferrule became loose. Countless canvases were ripped, my failed attempts.

Despite everything, he stayed the same, making sure not to break the uptight posture I told him to keep. It was the only time I saw his head held high, free, not having to stress about formality or being respectful; he looked charming that way, like a bird getting to spread its wings after being let out of a cage. I wanted to capture his smile, his gorgeous smile, which he showed only to the plants he tended to. Never thought I would be jealous of such little things that can be dust beneath my foot, because I knew, unlike the plants, his smile for me was not genuine. He was following orders, like he always did, and this time those orders were mine. As much as I fooled myself into denying it.



“Stop wasting your time on that servant boy son, you are keeping him from doing his duties,” my father told me one evening.

The herbal tea I was drinking burned my tongue; it felt like the floating leaves were mimicking the scorching sun that blistered the servant’s skin who gathered them. I forced myself to finish it, trying to push away the pictures the thought sketched in my mind.

“You should be done with those paintings of yours by now,” he said as I tried to come up with an excuse, because I realised then I did not want them to be done, or finished.

“But father, painting is hard, I need more time,” I replied, turning to my mother who sat next to him, hoping for a save that never came.

“You threw away five this week alone. If you go on like that, then it will take an eternity. What is so special about that boy anyway? You finished that portrait of your mother in about two days. What is it about him that is so hard to draw?” He asked, and I had no answers.

“You can not understand an art you do not possess, Father.”

“Is that your excuse to steer away from learning about the family business now?”

It was, “No, it is not.”

“Sure,” my father said with the familiar eye roll he did so often. “I will have you married off to a woman way more educated than you, then you will come to understand how embarrassing that is. To waste away your prime attending to futile things.”

I stiffened at his words and fought the urge to utter ‘good luck finding one.’ Instead, I fixed my gaze on my mother, who was always the observer, quiet was the invisible artist, I thought.

Moments like these pierced the safe bubble I had built for myself, it made me aware of the air that I breathe, air that I choke, stealing me away from my latibule. I tried to forget my father’s words, forget where I was, where I came from, and why I lived. For a moment, I wanted it to just be only me who existed in the world, and him, I would teach him my language, and he would teach me his. I would take his hand in mine again and ask for his name, and he would know mine.

Would I not be free of worries then?

A wave of melancholy washed over me every time I woke up, dreams ended, and needles came to prick against my skin. It did not have to be this way. It did not have to hurt this much, but it did, because life was cruel that way.



On a sunny day in another December, he was in my room, standing where I had asked him to. After countless hours of nagging my father, I had won the opportunity to buy him a sarong with an intricate floral pattern that complemented his features. At first, he was hesitant, afraid to even touch the high-quality cotton of vibrant violet. I did not know what to tell him, so I held it in my arms. It took him longer than I thought to finally take it from me, and god save me, I did not let the little grin that appeared on his lips for a fleeting second go unnoticed, and it reminded me of our playful youth.

He stared at me, and words were not needed for me to understand what he was silently asking. "For my painting," I replied, "I need you to look your best... also, New Year," I added, making him raise an eyebrow, which was understandable since New Year was celebrated in April. I was being too stubborn to accept the fact that I brought it as a gift.

I tried not to blush and took the paintbrush, making sure the lines I drew were straight. Given the chance, he looked dashing than any man I considered debonair. So I knew today was the day I would finish it.

Time passed like a slippery fish; the clock sang tick tock. Most of the colours on my palette were mixed, and my brush had turned a dark grey. I was almost done with the portrait, with only his magnetic eyes left to paint, when I saw him shift slightly. I got up from my seat, my hand had gone numb, but I seemed not to care.

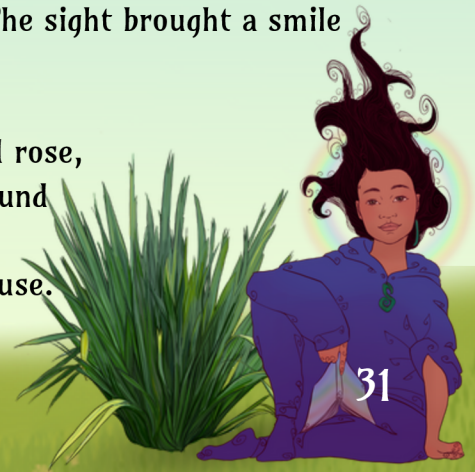
"Would you like to accompany me to the garden?" I asked, gesturing for him to follow me because I knew expecting a reply was fruitless. Regardless, who would say no to a simple break?

Our garden was splashed with flamboyance, paint splattered everywhere from trees to leaves, fresh blooms of beautiful Bougainvillea, blazing Hibiscus and flaming Ixora swaying along the breeze, a trimmed Ceylon Ironwood stood like a giant next to an assembly of Dwarf Pine Trees, and a Jackfruit tree was a voiceless observer as Lavender and Carnations breathed a sense of home to every household, found only in the Little England we had created in the Central Province of the country. The pearl from the Indian Ocean.

I wanted to reach for his hand again, but found no excuse. Minutes passed in silence, the sky bled scarlet and amber as the sun slowly started to disappear. He was beholding the sky, and I knew for sure he was searching for the evening star. The sight brought a smile to my face. A star in search of another star.

I let the ephemera of the moment swallow me, reaching for a red rose, I stole it away instead. I tapped on his shoulder twice, and we found ourselves under the resilient Jackfruit tree.

I took his hand because this time I had an excuse, I found an excuse. I did not know what to tell him, so I silently placed the blossom in his hand.



We said nothing; quiet was the mouse, until it was not. He spoke. Voice a velvety whisper, knocking my breath away.

“Thank you.”

I blinked. I did not know he could speak, or I did, but never expected it. Why? He did not stop there, staring as if speaking to my soul, he took my hand and placed a blossom in it as well, one I had not seen him pluck—a tiny bud of a yellow chrysanthemum.

“I appreciate you noticing me and treating me like I matter, Sir, yet I do not want to be your model anymore. You say I am your muse, but I wish not to be; I hope you let my painting go,” he said and ripped my ribcage apart, crushing my heart gently.

“Why?”

“Because it is keeping me from doing my duties, I am my father’s son; his burden is also mine.”

“Why?”

“You know why, Sir.”

Why was all I asked, yet a thousand questions suffocated me, but expecting an answer was fruitless. I turned haphazardly, the world a whirlwind of blur, and walked away, because I did not want him to see the river I swam in my eyes, men did not cry, my father said, I must not have been a man yet then.

It started with stars, simple shapes moving to an invisible artist, tea leaves, and mountains surrounding an illusory home, feverish flowers, fragile butterflies from a garden, and a gardener’s son...him. Him who clung to his father’s hand, him who bathed in the sun, him who I did not know the name of, him who was to be my final muse, him who I failed to draw the eyes of, gate to the soul, him who gave me a bud of yellow chrysanthemum, him and him and him.

I dreamt of a star each and every night; he shone so bright, far from sight, seraphic and wild. I wondered if I would get to hold him.

No, I knew, so I woke up and painted, on a soulless canvas that brought that sparkle to life, and thrived, which would have to be enough, knowing I will never reach him. Born from my yearning, crafted by my hand, that was my last painting.

