

"Balcony"

Caroline Bybee

We are sitting on the balcony, smoking American cigarettes and listening to Korean music. As the foreign voices rise and fall, the city lights take turns flicking on, beauty in the disarray. We are masters in these contradictions - dark and light, alien and familiar, together and alone.

I can see the whole world from here. I wish you could too. From where you sit, I am sure that you could be whatever you wanted, but I am sure that all you see is red-gray ashes. I am watching the city breathe out as the sun drags its last fingers through the nighttime, I am feeling it breathe in as inky black settles in around us. You are looking for the stars, but this is the city and you know you will never find them.

It gets later as we finish our pack of Marlboros. We crumple the package and toss it to the wind; littering doesn't really matter in these trash-filled streets. I want to laugh as we move closer and closer to the balcony's edge, dangling our feet and swinging them like madmen. Are we madmen? Sometimes I think that I am, but I want to laugh when you want to cry, so if it's not me then surely it's you.

I always assumed that you want to cry. Your eyes are sad, so sad. With the red tips gone, you have nothing to stare at but the sky, and there is nothing up there but nothing. The moon has hidden itself, ashamed and naked in comparison to the sun of the city lights, and so black is all that can see, darkness so deep that you could lose your soul - and you look like you already have. If we were different kinds of kids, not madmen, not chain smokers, not contradictions, I would probably offer you a hand. Some help. As it is, I laugh even when I'm sure you're about to cry because what else can I do?

After all, the city at night is our playground, lit up like an amusement park, but you are scared of clowns. And so I guess we're just going to sit here, precarious on the edge of this balcony, where the ground is so far down and the sky is so far up and we are stuck somewhere in the middle, with trash and laughter and tears. At some point, my flip flop slips off my foot and falls down down down, a sort of end over end tumble that I imagine we would take if these

rusted bars that we lean on were to break. I don't tell you this and I don't complain about my shoe. You are too distracted, too contemplative to even care, and it was a five dollar pair anyway.

I'm finding it harder to care about anything. You're rubbing off on me in that sense, with your "world-be-damned" attitude and your red-box cigarettes. I used to care and I never used to smoke, but something has changed in these nights where I drop my shoes. I get rust stains on my shirts and you don't care so I don't care, and you're teaching me to blow smoke rings even though I'm a terrible student.

One day I'll blow smoke rings and you'll still be crying on this balcony. Although I've never actually seen you cry, I know that you do. You're human like me - painfully so, as I can plainly see. I don't think you even know how much it shows, really, or else you'd probably hide it. That's something else that I learned from you. Pride. Never showing weakness is almost as important as blowing smoke rings, in this world of yours, this world that's now mine.

In your, my, our world, there are so many rules that I am still learning. There are rules of rust on t-shirts and rules of pride and rules of smoke rings. Maybe there are rules that make you sad as you are, but I don't know if any rule could ever cause so much emptiness in your eyes. I think you brought that on yourself, but I know better than to ask, because we've got a good thing going here, on this balcony with our American cigarettes and our Korean music and contradictions. The beauty of this night is all around us, and it makes me laugh even if it makes you cry.