

I have traveled to many places in my lifetime. I have watched great cities fall and new ones rise from their smoldering ashes— each believing they are more invincible than the last. The world shifts and changes around my aching feet, always moving faster than before. On this giant rock we call our home, there is only so much space. Still, with each century we seem to grow. So rare it is to find a patch of soil, a gust of air, that feels the way it felt to me so long ago. When I was powerful. When I was feared. Now, I am nothing but a weary face in a sea of weary faces. So I travel. I observe.

There is too much to see. Time is an unforgiving leash that promises to annihilate what I have not witnessed without remorse. Whole cultures have been destroyed without ever feeling my warmth among their people. I have seen so much and missed so much more. It is easy in this weakened state to become enraptured by the lives of those around me. With the sun on my back and the blue sky above, I watch them grow and it is a beautiful sight. At the end of each day I am reminded that though I try, I cannot stay. There is so little time.

But here, on the hard plastic seats of the *Sistema de Transporte Colectivo Metrorrey*, traveling between the third stop and the last, I feel as if I could spend eons.

I have been on many metros during my time. There is nothing special about this one. The lights attached to the ceiling of each car are riddled with tiny cracks, flickering when the train travels too deep below the earth. Faded graffiti remains on the windows, only the outline of words long washed away. Each seat is worn, the scents of a thousand different souls absorbed by the polished plastic. The people speak in a hidden language— made of darting eyes and thin-lipped smiles. Their mouths do not move unless they must. Within this rule, like any rule, there is one exception.

They arrive with laughter on their wings, stepping between sliding doors into the same car they do every day. The air changes with their footfalls, sending shivers through my leathered heart when I know they will approach. A pair, creatures of habit that first enticed me with the warmth radiating from their gentle bodies. When they are empty, the couple will seat themselves in the hard plastic chairs across from my own. When they are not, they stand, greeting me with the same delight and openness as the first day I was ever so fortunate to meet their path. An unlikely friendship bloomed between us in the cracks of that old subway. Lovers, young and full of hope—and an old god, weary and traveling.

Over many days and many rides, they tell me their story. I hear their words entangled with the words of my people. In them, I see the old world as it was before: thriving and strong, full of passion and history. I cling to their story as if it is my own. “We were friends as children,” he explains one day, his hand resting gently against her thigh. He is a military man, always in uniform, posture stiff and face stern. But his eyes sparkle when he speaks of her, alive with vigorous color that grows stronger with her head against his shoulder.

“I always knew,” she contributes, winding their fingers together. “I told him when we were young— I never wanted anyone else.” In her, I see so much more of the old world. She breathes the energy of my time, secrets buried beneath the secret of her dark gaze. It is another life I visit when I look at her, another love that flourishes in the broken pieces of an unforgiving world. History overlaps when their lips touch, creating ripples in the surface of time. Each day when they exit the car, one stop before my own, I feel the urge to pray.

But who do gods pray to?

I know their routine well, it seems. On Mondays, he brings her a fresh bouquet, bursting with color. Never once have they been the same arrangement, he fills her life with bold colors and sweet scents that she has never held before. I hear the crinkle of the plastic surrounding it before their feet ever step off the platform. Next comes the laughter, blushing and bright as she tells him once again that she doesn’t need such things. Then the brightness of her eyes comes to rest on me, smile warm and inviting. Each day, we fill the dull ride with our conversation, drawing the eyes of onlookers who would rather remain silent.

“What’s the secret?” they ask me, curiosity burning like a stoked fire between them. “How do you get to live as long as you have?”

“*Cocone*,” I tell them, letting the Nahuatl word slip from my lips, “you do not wish to live as long as me.” For the first time, I feel a rumble like thunder in my chest. Laughter spills from my dry, cracked lips. They laugh with me. They agree.

On the metro, we talk about everything. Life, wisdom, politics, and happiness. They ask me for my secrets, for the lessons I have learned, and I repeat back to them the stories of my travels—giving not what they ask for, but what they need. For my thoughts, she gifts me with a flower from the bouquet. Sometimes it is red, like her cheeks. Sometimes it is blue, like his eyes. I wrap my wrinkled fingers around its stem, a deep breath of sunlight pouring into my lungs as its warmth surrounds me. “Thank you,” I whisper. My altar, once filled with dust and broken cobwebs, is soon decorated with her flowers. With each petal, I feel my tired bones grow stronger.

They share so much of their life with me, it is almost as if I am a part of it. I teach them the word *colli*, meaning ‘grandfather’. This is what they call me since I dare not give my name. In return, they show me pictures of their journeys, their pets, and family. These captured moments of joy stay with me long after we have spoken their goodbyes. I cherish each memory as if they are my own.

When they exit the metro, I feel the urge to weep—not in mourning but in joy. The purity in their love is something rare. Too often does the world corrupt what does not belong to it and in love, it finds the most delicious hearts.

It is a cold morning the day she gives me my flower. The *cempasuchil*, I know each of its silken petals better than I know how my own flesh is strewn across my bones. It is red as fire and full of mourning, surrounded by the cold clutches of death. I know their grief before it strikes, before the flower ever passes between our grasps. When they leave on that cold, dreadful day, a warning presses on my lips. *Be careful*, I want to tell them. *Stay safe. Protect each other.* Instead, there is nothing. Only silence. Only the thrum of other bodies shifting around the hollow space where the couple used to reside. As if they were never there at all. As if they never would be again.

After that day, they do not ride the metro again. The flowers on my altar begin to wilt. The sun does not shine on the city of Monterrey. Still, I take the old car through the heart of the city—waiting to hear the crinkle of plastic and the bursting of laughter uncontained. But strangers occupy their place across from me, distant and cold. Their eyes look at me and then away. There is no lesson on those days. No talks. No pictures. No flowers.

Time passes so quickly that I do not even recognize how the days turn. I am lost, frozen and forgotten, unable to move from the path that I have walked for so long. The metro is only that once again— a metro, full of flickering lights and the scent of a thousand different bodies all clamoring to claim the same space. Drifting souls with no interest in the huddled, weary old man waiting for company that would not come.

I do not recognize her when she rides the metro next. She is alone, dressed in thick black cloth that can combat the cold on her skin— but not the cold I see in her eyes. Beside her, a beaten plastic chair acts as a marker for where her husband used to sit. “Where is your love?” I ask her. For a moment, there is surprise on her face. She has forgotten my face, the memory of my voice is a lost one.

Her hands clasp together. “Gone,” she tells me. There is a hollowness in her bones. Her cheeks cave inwards, outlining the brittle cage of her skeleton. She has not slept. She has not eaten. “He’s gone.”

I do not ask when he will return. We both know that he will not.

For the first time, I rise up in front of her. The rattling metal train feels so small around me, yet my form is still so frail. My feet move, crossing the swaying floor to the empty seat beside her. With a huff, my body falls into the vacant space. Ever so gently, her head rests against my shoulder as if it was his. “How is it fair?” she mutters, hot tears dripping from her cheeks.

“It’s not, *cihuatzintli*,” I reply. “It never is.”

She tells me of their plans. The names of children that would never be born. Family memories that will never be made. Then, she tells me of her tragedy. Of the soul-hungry monster that is war, a beast gnawing on its own limbs to fight off enemies that are not there. It takes at it

takes— and it leaves no survivors. Not even the good. Not even the loving. Not even that which rips a hole in the fabric of our world where something beautiful once lived. Now there is only rot, bloodied decay where life should have flourished.

My heart aches with her mourning, at the loss of love so young. I cannot help but turn to face her before I speak. “Come with me.” The offer allows me to wrap my shriveled hand around hers. I stroke the blue of her young, twitching veins with the pad of my thumb. “I cannot do much to help you,” I warn her. “But what I can do—I will.” She nods as I wipe the tears from her eyes. There is little strength in her. Between the two of us, there is even less.

We ride the metro to the end of the line. One by one, the car empties of all other passengers until we are the only ones remaining. The silence is not one I will ever forget. It was not the quiet peace of two enjoying the company shared between them. It was the shredding sound of two unable to speak through the grief choking their lungs.

When the doors slide open once more, I keep my hand in hers, leading her from the car. There is no platform waiting for us on the other side. No concrete walls or impatient stares. Instead, the sun burns bright above our heads. Her breath shudders in her throat, drawn up tight in a gasp as her eyes widen. A soft, grass-covered hill and the blue skies above is what waits for us. Feet stumbling, I worry that she cannot make the climb, but she does. Her head swivels in every direction, soaking up the miracle that has taken place before her eyes. The warmth of the sun dries the last of her tears to her cheeks.

On top of the hill, a golden altar waits. It is stained with old blood, dark and thick, but there has been no sacrifice in five hundred years. Instead, it has been adorned with flowers. Some of them are red, like the blush in her cheeks. Some of them are blue, like his eyes. In the middle, my flower waits.

She recognizes the flowers, but when her feet come to a stop, she does not recognize me. “Who are you?” The words are a whisper. Slowly, I draw her down into the grass, letting the two of us sit on the hill and rest.

“I am Tōnatiuh, the fifth sun.” The name has power, burning and thick. Once, I was feared— worshipped. But there is no place for old gods in a city long destroyed. “For many years,” I tell her, “I have watched you grow. And your offerings have pleased me.” Her breathing is shallow, shivering as her shoulders tremble. But she believes. She believes. “I cannot return to you what was taken,” I admit. There is not enough power in me to restore the dead. There hasn’t been for many years. “So this is what I offer: life in a different form— but eternal.” As I speak, I watch her eyes gloss over once more. Deep in thought, lost in concentration. My voice softens as her fingers tighten around my own. “You and your love will be together forever.”

“Yes.” There is no hesitation in her voice. “Yes.”

That is all it takes. Her hair lightens, sprouting petals made of fire as her body turns to root and stem. A *cempasuchil*, growing on the hillside, living forever in the sunshine. As she blooms, I take a deep breath, calling into the wind when I release it. That is when he arrives— a darting hummingbird, the pattern of his blue eyes immortalized on his glossy wings. For as long as this flower blooms, as long as the hummingbird lives, there will be no end to the kisses he places with his beak or the whispered words spoken between them. Life everlasting. Love, ever growing.

With a sigh, I watch the two of them, their happiness blooming in eternal sunshine. My bones ache with the weariness of an absent god as I settle down into the hillside. Palms running against each smooth blade of grass, I look over my domain. My last piece of earth that belongs to me. The hill is dotted with my flowers, hummingbirds darting between them with endless energy. I thrive here, in the sea of my story, where forlorn lovers find their final rest if they find my weary body somewhere in the moving world. My presence is both curse and blessing.

In the sunshine, it is difficult to tell.