

Three Poets

The long metal gate was a charcoal-gray color with vines wrapped artistically and brushy weeds all along the base that seemed to have been planted there on purpose. The gate squeaked like an old bird. At least that's what I thought. Whenever it was opened I imagined an old, asshole of a bird who had given up on everything and spent his time alone in his nest, which was far up in a crooked, dead tree with no leaves. My father would open the gate whenever he finished writing a poem. He would step through in his bathrobe and slippers, he would walk a few paces to stand among the desert brush and cacti, his shoes crunching in the pale red sand. With his back to us he would hold up the paper and recite his poem in a clear, somber voice for all to hear. All was silent as we listened. And when it was over, with our silence still hanging in the air, he would produce from his bathrobe pocket a pair of scissors, which he would use to cut out every word from the manuscript. When he finished, his poem would be a pile of scraps. Each word would now be on its own separate small cutout piece of paper. He would hold the scraps up in both hands and gently let the wind take his poem away. The little bits of paper would drift through the air, with some pieces getting stuck in between rocks and weeds, while others continued on with the wind, disappearing into the desert. And then everyone on the grounds would clap and cheer as my father returned through the gate. He would wave and bow his noble head as he made his way back into the house.

My name is Raphael Rainer von Archero. My father is Francesco von Archero. I'm eleven years old. I used to be ten and I liked it, but eleven is better. I don't think I want to be twelve.

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He had the look of an outlaw, although he carried no pistol. His hair was wild, as if he'd been struck by lightning, and his clothes were tattered. As I came closer I could see that his eyes were dark and shining, and he needed a shave. He leaned forward on the gate with his arms crossed in front of him. "Excuse me, does the poet Francesco von Archero live here," he asked, gesturing with his shoulder toward the house.

"Yes, he lives here," I responded. "I'm his son. Do you know him?"

"I know him from his writing, he doesn't know me. I'm a poet as well. My name is Gabriel." He outstretched his hand over the fence and after a moment of hesitation I shook it. "I'd very much like to meet your father."

"Anyone is welcome into the courtyard. We have many guests, but very few are allowed inside the house to see my father. He needs complete solitude while he works. If you wait in the courtyard maybe he'll let you in at some point." I opened the gate and the old bird squeaked. "The circus is here," I said, leading him inside.

He walked a few paces behind me as we moved through the grounds. All around us the performers drifted like ghosts – doing cartwheels and juggling, flipping and spinning in the air. They seemed to silently float, their toes only lightly brushing the earth, as if the courtyard was a ballet stage. They all wore red costumes with their faces painted white. Even the giraffes that strolled around had their faces painted.

"Why is the circus here," Gabriel asked.

"I told you, we have many guests. People come from miles around just to be near my father and hear him read new poems. He's a most respected person." I led him to the south wall where he could sit and wait. He squatted down onto the red dirt and leaned his back

against the adobe. "If you're a poet," I said, "it would be best if I brought my father one of your poems, and maybe then he'll see you."

"That's a good idea," Gabriel replied and pulled a small notebook and pen from his pocket. "I'll write him a fresh one."

"Take your time," I said. A few yards across, in the shade of the weeping willow trees, a ragged marching band began to play a slow, mournful version of the song *Lorena*. The music became a perfect soundtrack for the dancing movement of the circus performers.

"I love this song. Don't you, Raphael," asked a woman who sat on the stone steps leading up to the house. She was completely naked and her skin was a warm copper. As she spoke she began to rub handfuls of aqua-blue paint gently over her breasts. I thought she was very beautiful, but I turned away and looked to the ground out of shyness.

"Yes, it's a very good song," I said.

* * *

To Francesco von Archero

I boxed an old cactus out in the desert.

I rocked it so hard in the gut

that it threw up water and needles,

and returned to its corner breathing heavy.

I couldn't help but think of you.

“There’s mirrors inside the minds

of crazy faces” – Bob Dylan

How sweet was yesterday’s wine,

drunk by perfumed women

who left lipstick on all the glasses

And then gave you a blowjob before lunch,

out beside the fountain while afternoon sun bathed the courtyard.

You put your hands behind your head.

But now, storm clouds gather all around you.

A man dressed as an iguana knocks on your front door.

He asks you for directions to the nearest tequila bar

and you have no idea what he means.

Later that night as you lie awake in between silk sheets,

you feel alone and fat

because time has passed you by.

* * *

“No, no, this is a truly terrible poem. Raphael, why do you bring me such a bad poem? Look at it, it’s too aggressive! Every line tries to come at me like a knife! That’s not how poetry should be. A poem should be a meditation, a prayer. It should be a calm island in an otherwise stormy sea. As Matisse said, art should be like a soft armchair at the end of a long day. Look at it, this poem does nothing! And not to mention...it’s vulgar. There are a few words in here, Raphael, that should never be spoken or written down. I won’t tell you what they are because I won’t corrupt your innocence, but they’re here. Who is this poet? This man who calls himself a poet, corrupting my young child? And look here, this use of quotation, why is that there? I suppose he thinks he’s channeling T.S. Eliot. Ha, no, I’m sure this clown’s never even heard of Eliot. Probably never even met anyone by the name of Eliot. Ha! Raphael, do the world a favor and burn this paper. And bring me a new brandy, please. Thank you. Now son, this Gabriel, he can stay in the courtyard as long as he likes, but I won’t have him in the house. I’m too busy with my work. I can’t be interrupted. Right now I’m in the middle of a poem based on the final words of General Stonewall Jackson. It’s a very somber thing, reflecting on death and the peace that comes with being laid to rest. If I finish tomorrow then we can cut it up and give it to the wind. Oh, Raphael, make sure the giraffes have enough water. It’s getting hot out there. We don’t want them keeling over from thirst. There’s no room to bury a giraffe out there. Maybe one, but not all of them. I love having the circus here!”

* * *

Gabriel drank with his back against the southern wall and played cards on an overturned bucket with a group of tired looking sailors. Their eyes were worn and heavy, and their clothes were torn. One of the sailors had a tattoo of a navy blue octopus on his

forearm. I could see it when he rolled his sleeve up. They passed around a bottle of whiskey and smoked cigars while playing poker, betting with whatever they had in their pockets: coins, gold watches, cigarettes, crumpled up bills.

“I’m sorry that my father won’t see you,” I said to Gabriel.

“It’s alright,” he said, dealing out another hand, “I didn’t expect him too. I must say I dislike your father’s poetry. In fact I hate it. I only came here to see for myself if the rumors of his decadence and decay were true. They are.”

“I think I’m...I think I fold,” one of the sailors said drunkenly, laying down his cards.

“How can you hate his poetry,” I asked, astonished. “He’s the most respected living poet.”

“There was a time and place for him. Things have changed. Life has changed. His words don’t mean anything to the world we live in now. You can’t see it because you live here, secluded and sequestered from the rest of the world. Outside these walls there’s still a war going on. Something new needs to take your father’s place and we need to begin again, fresh.”

“I’m not secluded,” I said. At that moment, in the center of the courtyard, the opera singer began her performance and the crowd became quiet. She had come to stay with us a few days earlier, bringing with her an entourage of friends and handlers. My father had greeted her at the gate with flowers and a kiss. And now – as she stood alone in pearls and a long dress – her beautiful, crystalline voice rose high into the air. It was delicate and yet somehow a strength hid within it. Echoing throughout the courtyard, it projected a calm reassurance. People began to applaud and even the sailors turned to listen, while Gabriel tapped his cards against the bucket.

“Would you like a drink,” he asked, offering me the bottle.

“I’ll try it.” I took a swig and coughed, feeling it burn down my throat.

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“Your poem’s getting better,” Gabriel said, handing me back the paper, “but I still hear too much of your father in it. It needs to be your own voice, your own point of view. Don’t just write what you want people to hear, it has to be the truth, even if it’s ugly or embarrassing. Always be true to how you’re feeling at the moment of writing.”

We were walking together through the grounds, passing between a group of women who carried umbrellas twirling over their shoulders. They smiled at Gabriel and he smiled back, scratching his wild hair and taking a sip from his whiskey bottle. He’d been drinking very steadily all week, I’d noticed.

He continued: “Try writing a poem about one of those women back there. Pick one out and focus, write everything that comes to mind about how she looks, how she sounds, the way it feels to stand next to her, the way it feels when she goes away. And don’t worry if the words don’t make much sense together, just capture the feeling, the essence of the feeling.”

“Alright, I’ll give it a try,” I said. “And when I’m finished you’ll want to take a look at it?”

“Fuck no. When you’re done give it to the girl.”

“But...but what if she doesn’t like it?”

“What if she does? She’ll either slap you or you’ll get laid. Either way, you’ll get over it.”

Around that time my father emerged from the house, walking softly down the stone steps in his bathrobe and slippers, the early afternoon sun upon his smiling face. "I have finished another poem," he spoke loudly and the crowd cheered. Everyone gathered around to follow him through the courtyard. He stepped through the gate and the old bird squeaked. He stood out there beside a tall cactus, looking like a famous statue among the weeds, and began to read his poem. The crowd went silent as they always did, holding their breath, but something was different. The poem he read didn't affect me the way they usually did. Somehow it all seemed hollow, somehow the words fell flat as if they were written in a language I didn't understand. All around me I could see everyone's smiling faces, and I just felt empty. After finishing the poem my father cut up the paper and gave it to the wind.

"What bullshit," Gabriel said loudly as the pieces blew away. I could tell my father hadn't heard it, but the people around us gave dirty looks and clapped louder to cover up what he'd said.

My father came back through the gate, waving and bowing to the crowd. "My friends," he said, "Tonight we will have a celebration to commemorate this beautiful creative streak I've been on." At this, the people cheered even louder and threw their hands in the air. "Tonight we'll have the celebration of the century!"

I looked to Gabriel. His eyes were like shadows, downcast and stormy. "Tonight's the night," he whispered underneath his breath – lost in thought.

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Gabriel disappeared. I searched over by the southern wall, I asked the sailors and all the women, but there was no trace. The evening came upon us and all I could do was walk through the courtyard alone, feeling worse than before.

* * *

When my eyes opened in the morning my back was flat against the dry grass and the sky was a perfect, cloudless blue. But down low in one corner, in the periphery of my vision, the blue was smeared with a thick line of black smoke that poured steadily across the canvas of the sky, like a splash of oil in a glass of water.

I sat up. All around me were the remnants of the celebration the night before: people passed out on the grass (some of them groggily rolling around), broken bottles, tents, blankets, clothes that had been cast aside, used up fireworks (still smoldering), musical instruments in the dirt, chairs and tables overturned. It looked like the aftermath of a strange battle. I found confetti in my hair. Across the field I saw that the smoke was coming from a tent that was on fire. A few people had gathered around, watching it burn itself out. A ragged harlequin took out his penis and pissed on the flames, which made the others laugh quietly. My head was aching and my eyes felt heavy, as somehow I got to my feet. Slowly I made my way through the field, stepping over the bodies and debris. A large horse appeared from nowhere and came close to me. Light footsteps navigated the obstacles below. It must have been wild – just wandering through our camp. I reached out my fingers to brush its mane as it trotted past. The animal moved across the field and disappeared like smoke into the outskirts of the forest.

As I passed back into the courtyard and staggered up the stone steps leading to the house, I noticed the two heavy front doors were slightly open, which was never allowed. I

stepped through them as cautiously as a cat and began to follow the trail of blood I found running down the marble tile of the hallway. It led to the next room where the body of my father – the great and respected poet Francesco von Archero – lay dead. Above him stood Gabriel, still with the knife in his hands and blood running down his legs. I sat cross-legged on the floor and for some reason there were no tears.

“I’m sorry that you had to lose him,” Gabriel spoke. “But it had to be done.” He came towards me, dropping the knife to the ground as he moved. I heard the clatter as it landed. He passed me by with quick steps, heading for the door. At that moment I felt an unexpected energy swell inside me. Without thought, without a plan, I snatched up the bloody knife from the floor and sprung towards him. In a fast moment I tackled him from behind and had him on the ground.

“YOU PIECE OF SHIT, YOU KILLED HIM,” I screamed and tried to force the knife down into him, as he grabbed tightly onto my wrists to stop it. I pushed it as hard as I could, bringing the blade within inches of his throat, but finally his strength won out and I was thrown backward. I hit the wall hard and slid to the ground, watching as the knife too slid across the floor – back into his hands.

Gabriel stood and smiled. He slowly came toward me. “I was hoping you’d do something like that,” he said. “Now you’re a real poet.” I leaned against the wall, looking up to him and breathing heavy. My head felt broken, and now the tears came flowing. He leaned forward and squinted his dark eyes. “No, wait,” he said and brought the knife up to my face.

“DON’T,” I cried out, but it was too late. With one quick snap of the wrist he slashed a clean cut through my cheek, just beneath the eye. I cried out again as the blood splashed against the wall.

“*Now* you’re a poet,” he said. “A good poet needs to carry a few scars. This whole place will be a great scar for you.” With that he tossed the knife into the corner and turned to leave. I held my cheek with both hands and watched as he strolled to the door.

“What am I supposed to do now? You’ve taken everything from me.”

He turned back in the doorway and smiled again. “You’re free now. Do what you want. Write, paint, change your name, run away to another country. You’re a poet, you decide. But whatever you do, best get out of here. With your father gone this place won’t be the same. People act a little strange when they lose a leader.” And with that he disappeared.

I sat there alone for some time, unsure of what to do. It was like a heavy daze or a dream you can’t wake up from. The body of my father lay crumpled in the corner, but my eyes couldn’t approach it. Finally I stood and left the room. I went out the front doors and there in the courtyard the crowd had gathered. All the performers, all the travelers and musicians and sailors – they were all there. My father’s friends and followers – the people that had come from miles around just to be near him – they were all before me, and they were on their knees. Everything was silent until finally I said the only words I could: “He’s gone.”

There wasn’t a murmur from the crowd, and there was no movement. The sky seemed too dark for this early hour of the day. Then someone in the middle called out: “Read us a poem! You have your father’s blood in you.”

"You *are* him," someone else cried. "He's been born again as you. He'll always be born again. Read us a poem!"

Then all the other voices began to chime in: "You *are* him! You *are* him! Read us a poem! Read it to us!" Their chants became a chorus. They pounded their hands against the ground, they moaned, they swung their heads back in weird ecstasy – their bodies undulating together in a strange rhythm. "You *are* him! You are him reborn!" Their faces became a blur – a smear of flesh colored paint. It was as if they now wore masks and only the teeth shown through, bright and vicious.

I still had the poem I'd written in my pocket and inside the house I found my father's scissors. When I reemerged outside the crowd had risen to their feet and split down the middle for me to pass through. My body moved without me somehow. As if in a trance, I slowly walked between them. All was silent, but I could feel their warm breath panting against my skin – their bodies shifting like animals in a cage.

I opened the gate and the old bird squeaked. I stepped through, my feet tracing the steps of my father. I held the paper and began to read my poem in a voice that wasn't my own – a voice somehow deeper, somehow much older than mine ever was. The poem came to an end and my hand began to work the scissors. A few quick moves reduced each word to scraps. I held the poem out towards the desert and gently – so gently – the wind took it. The little bits of paper drifted away, dancing among the rocks and brush, scattering forever.

When I turned back to the crowd they began to applaud. The poem had been awful, but they loved it. Their chants and laughter filled the courtyard, and I knew right then that if I wanted it, it was mine. Everything my father had, every ounce of fame and respect – if I wanted it, it was mine. All the power that he held over these people, this wild mob of

animals – if I wanted it, it was mine. A deep darkness seemed to descend upon everything.
A flash of lightning came across the sky. If I wanted it, it was mine.

* * *

I ran. I moved naked through the gray trees and underbrush, dodging limbs and bushes – pulsing through the forest in a blur. My bare feet touched over wet leaves and broken sticks. Around me I could hear the howling of wolves and even hear their quick footsteps on the forest floor, but I was not afraid.

End