

Bottom of Chongqing - Zaphiya, Year 10, TAS

There was a rumour in Chongqing that you could be born on the bottom floor and spend the rest of your life never touching the ground. After one day there, it was easy to believe. One's first impressions of the metropolis were swaths of rainbow light dazzling your retinas, pollution rattling in your lungs, layers upon layers of swirling motorways and trains and buildings stacked upon one another so thickly it mimicked a man-made forest of concrete. It was vile, beautiful, claustrophobic. It was impossible to believe it could be built atop anything, impossible to believe it had an end.

Oneri's mother had always said to kiss the sky; her grandmother had always said to kiss the ground. When they finally moved from the bottom level, they opted for somewhere in between. Oneri had yet to decide whether she liked the sky with its light or the ground with its teeth-like plants more.

The opportunity came when her grandmother passed away. The old lady's body was stiff and parched on the desecrated couch, her skin pale, her blue eyes milky as they stared up at the ceiling. Her chest was still. Oneri paused in the doorway, staring with seeing eyes at the corpse on the couch. Her lungs constricted.

That evening Oneri's mother's eyes flashed with blue fire. She was a storm that crackled with white hot lightning. Thunder rolled every time her mouth opened to scream. In their small apartment the shrieking words had swallowed every corner.

At first Oneri had forced herself under the bed of their shared room, staring out into the apartment with eyes as unseeing as her grandmother's, but it was inescapable. Her flailing body was abruptly yanked from its fragile refuge. Oneri was pushed by callused hands out of the front door where she stumbled backwards onto the street. Her panic lodged itself in her throat, rendering her speechless. The words were stuck. She stood very still, breathless.

"You killed her!" her mother was screaming, nostrils flaring like a bull's. The light from the bleach-white streetlamp on her left gave her pale face the strong appearance of a ghost.

Oneri ran with shaking hands. She tripped down the spiralling stairs, past sickly faces, through the maze of buildings and concrete scars. She stopped only when it occurred to her that she had nowhere to run. She hunched her shoulders against the chill of the evening and tucked her jacket around her body.

That night she slept on a steel bench watching faceless people wander, their hollow eyes illuminated by cold light from impassive rectangles. The ice grasped into her bones with reaching fingers. No one blinked twice or spared a second glance to the girl with clattering teeth. In the city with no end there was no time for your neighbour.

In the morning, when the sun rose in the pale orange sky and the skyscrapers cast black shadows, Oneri woke, uneasy. The early clamour of cars squealing on the twisting roads above and below echoed in the cold cavern of her chest where her family used to be.

Oneri eventually opted for following her mother's advice. Her legs dragged her upwards, towards the blue heavens. The concrete stairs jarred her joints. The sun peeked out, almost close enough to kiss. So close, so close! She could taste the sky, she could make it!

Then the sun had to go and set in an inferno of bleeding red. A sly fog rolled in from the river.

She carried herself upwards for days in an absent grey mist so thick she could not see the blinding white sun in the time that it was day. She searched around and around the empty streets, seeking and looking aimlessly for the next set of stairs to lead her to heaven.

No stairs came. It occurred to her that maybe she had reached the top, pushed as far as she could go. Then where was the sky? Where was heaven? Where was the bliss that her mother had promised?

Gone. A lie?

Oneri drifted there like a piece of flotsam in a flood, her stomach whimpering like a kitten and her eyes as dull as the overcast sky. No one passed her, not even the faceless people. It was too bright up here for them. Better for them to linger below alongside the teeth-like plants.

The mist never cleared. It occurred to her that she was sitting in a cloud. She had pushed as far as she could go, and yet her heart remained empty, her chest a cavern, her stomach a faint growl on the wispy breeze.

A ghost visited Oneri in her dreams. Her first impressions were of bent legs, milky eyes, and parched skin so wrinkled it mimicked swaths of rolling hills. Her grandmother: a seed from Earth.

"Girl," she whispered faintly, her voice the sound of a tire against a gravel road. Her bent legs and shuffling feet meandered closer to where Oneri was sitting in a cloudy sea. "Girl. What did I tell you?"

Oneri found that she could not speak. Her body was absent, nameless, as if her consciousness had wandered up to heaven lacking its vessel.

"Girl," her grandmother repeated, stopping before Oneri's vacant face. "Girl. There's no fire up here. Your mother— she lied. There's no peace in being at the top of the world, girl."

The dream blurred at the edges, hurtling away like a timelapse of the starry night sky.

“Girl.”

Oneri met her grandmother’s milky eyes in that final heartbeat of the dream.

“Girl. Kiss the ground.”

Oneri woke up to find she was at the base of the white stairs leading to heaven. The misty clouds had evaporated. The white sun stared down the length of the infinite staircase to the bottom where it burned Oneri’s feet. The sun’s scorching ire scalded her skin and dried her lips until they were chapped and sore. The sun was painfully absent of compassion.

Tentatively, Oneri raised a foot to the first stair, only to scream in pain, mouth open, gaping in soundless agony. The sun had taken her foot with fire, seared the flesh until ashes remained. Was this the price to live at the top of the world? Was this the price for bliss, for heaven?

Girl. Kiss the ground.

Oneri removed what remained of her leg from the stair, stared at the sun and its miserable scalding hatred, and turned away. The sun pleaded at her back, coating her with warmth, firm fingers of sunlight grasping around her shoulder, begging for her to burn, to be swallowed, to die trying.

“No,” she said, and limped down the stairs. Her back grew cool. She left the light in favour of teeth-like plants.

She stumbled back into the monochrome sea of faceless people staring into impassive rectangles.

She had kissed the sky, and it had burned. “Don’t kiss the sky,” she warned the people that she passed, but they had no ears to hear.

No one in Chongqing had ever seen the ground, even those on the very bottom floor: they still had enough money in their shabby pockets for at least a sandwich, and if they didn’t they had companions. The ground was gone – it had passed out of living memory.

She fell to the lowest floor and searched for days. Her sleep was as empty as the cavern in her chest that had grown over time, and no dreams came. Her stomach crawled out and began to consume her flesh, hungry, hungry. Her lips bled.

Oneri finally collapsed onto the cold concrete on her scraped knees. Her skin was threadbare, her parched lips flapped soundlessly, and her burnt leg was splayed outwards like a bird with a broken wing.

Out of the concrete grew a staircase leading down. Unlike the sun it was lined with growth, blooming with colours like the first day of spring. It smelled of the faint earthy fragrance of a flower. It healed all her wounds and wet her lips, offering compassion. With a great heave of effort, she forced herself onto her renewed legs and tiptoed down into the green maw.

At the bottom of Chongqing, Oneri found a massive tree as tall as a hundred skyscrapers and as wide as fifty cargo ships moored to the port. Her branches spread infinitely outwards and lifted up the city like Atlas holding Earth. Her trunk was as thick as a baobab's. In the hollow of her great chest was a golden glow.

Oneri walked to the bottom of the tree and could not see the top. She could set the tree on fire and it would be inconsequential to the consciousness that thrummed through the veins of this magnificent child of Earth.

Oneri hugged the tree with big arms and allowed her rugged bark to envelop her tiny form, because in the golden hollow of that tree was the universe: love.

At the bottom of Chongqing was love.