

Eli Gray Nations '23

Their City

You could only see the remains of the city when the smoke obscured your vision.

It never appeared as much, at first glance. The city was simply that; this was just another city. Buildings peaked through the thick line of smog in the mornings and through the layers of ash in the afternoons. Cigarette trails lit up the streets instead of stars, drifting upwards until they encountered the gray cloud that hung over every building in sight, in all of the sights. On the roads and on the bridges, all anyone could ever see was the bustling faces of unimportant people passing by, everyday men and women who knew the *click* of a punch-card was their version of a defibrillator each morning.

But up in the ash-cloud? That's where you could see just how beautiful the city was. That's when you could see how empty all of the city was.

In the higher parts of the city, the wealthy had to wear masks to breathe. They were compact little things, wrapping the wearer up in hundreds of little tubes, stabbing in any vein imaginable, all connected to a small port covering the mouth and nose. There was a small tank that you had to wear, on the back of your neck. It stuck into the spine, to help make the mask feel natural. It was as if acupuncture met chemical handling, and it was the fashion of the day. Only the wealthy could afford to have them installed. Anyone who tried to do it on their own ended up in a pool of their own blood. But it was vital for surviving above the city, as the cloud of ash choked the air for supremacy in those high heights.

Anyone without a mask would see their skin turn gray and fingernails turn a dark black. These were the first telltale sights of the exposure. No treatment ever worked, which is why there was a considerable distance between each building, for cleanup crews.

The view was worth the risk.

In the nights when the buildings light up, when the dust cloud moves and shifts, drawn to the light like bugs, the city truly becomes beautiful. Up on the tops of all of the towers and all of the ruins, the life that chokes the city finally filters away, like dirt and grime being power washed away. No one walked the streets at night. They couldn't. All of the fog lights were switched on, all of the lights in the windows were reinforced with lines and panes of glass. And as the cloud moves, swirling through the street and mingling where the homeless used to live during the day, the tops of the buildings finally become visible, just barely above the shifting tide. The spirals of polluted metal and chrome speared into the sky again. Glass veins that had once been windows dropped down more and more into the populated parts of the tenants, an architectural open wound that was closed again in the morning. The bronzed husks of trees finally sighed, releasing breaths held in to not choke on the dust. The city became a city once again, the streets and high-rises becoming riverbanks of murky clouds.

That's why the woman in white was so important.

She parted the clouds and remained untouched. She was found hanging from a wire around her foot when the sun signaled to the dust cloud to rise up to the skylines again, her hair just barely on level with the third

floor of the abandoned department store. None of the buildings had the same architectural codes, due in part to competition, so the police used the nearest structure for reference. The building was given a name only when the woman in white hung outside it. The deep purple bruises and broken bones on her foot were the only signs of damage on her. Her face was almost peaceful, though this was hard to tell in the dust cloud. The police could just about reach her hands, trying to pull her down while an officer bribed his way into a nearby skyscraper to cut the wire. In the cloud, her face seemed to be broken into a million different pieces, particles of ash and smoke distorting her eyes into being bigger, her pores into becoming scars, everything jumbling together and becoming a blur.

She had blue eyes.

She swung slightly, as the cloud passed by. A continuous motion, as the cloud continued to weave its way through the streets. It was like she was being buffeted by a gentle stream, which wrapped her around like a parent giving their child a hug. It was almost wonderful, until it became clear just how pale her skin was, paler than her white dress. The dress got stains on it, the more she was carried by the cloud, little splotches that appeared like polka dots. Her skin, though, never blemished. Even in all the distortions of size and shape, just how pale she was never faded away. She was paler than the light of the night spotlights, paler than the bleached skeletons the rich would have encased in glass suits and dresses.

She had been dead long before the morning.

The way she swung back and forth had to have been an accident of some kind. She acted like a

windchime at times. And the officers found themselves looking at her, their heads tilted, hands in front of their eyes like they were blocking the sun from shining at them. Of course, it was always shady during the day, thanks to the cloud. Still, this woman somehow felt *normal*. This wasn't a case of not feeling right. This was a matter of her feeling too right. Like she was supposed to be found. Or that this was all some strange misunderstanding.

She was almost peaceful, until they cut her down.

Then she became terrifying.

She didn't have a scar on her until her ankle. No signs of fighting, no wounds of the like. If anything, this appeared to be a case of suicide, but without the signs of death. It was as if she was still sleeping, like she would suddenly sit up, confused, asking where she was and who the officers were. When she didn't wake during the autopsy, any theories from the police staff were proven wrong. No one could sleep through that. No internal bleeding. No poison residue. Not even any signs of organ failure. She was perfect. And yet she was dead. The only wound on her body was at her ankle.

She had to have died on the way down, yet there was no evidence that she did. And she remained in perfect condition, in the cloud that tainted every living thing it touched.

The woman in white broke everything they had grown to understand.

The news spread fast of the incident, of the "porcelain statue." The woman who seemingly lived and died in the cloud. The rich were utterly devastated that

someone could become untouched by the ash, and soon began to plunge themselves off the buildings and the skyscrapers out of despair. Then, out of the thrill. Early ones had their masks on, but they didn't protect them from the pavement as much as the smoke. So, they loosened their wires and tried again, only for the tubes and bones to snap on the way down, hoisting up gasping and stained bodies after. So, they dove in after without wearing anything but their suits and dresses. Their faces were distorted beyond compare. The cloud reached from above the skyscrapers to the distant windows below, and they were never silent on the way down. They screamed in the dust and the ash and the smoke and the vapors and the gasses and all of the neon lights. Their eyes were bulged. Their skin was cracked. Their teeth were blackened. They were cremated on the way down, just not in the traditional sense. Reduced to simply dust and ashes, but a personification of it rather than a pile. They hung by wires instead of by jars.

They hung by the families. By hundreds. That's how little of them there were.

Every single building was soon covered in them. Men and women and dresses and suits. All gasping and wheezing and kicking before falling still. Some had wires around their hands. Some around their feet. The worst of them had wires tied around their waist. They all ended up just barely touching the cloud. All reaching out, trying to get the perfect skin and eternal youth that the woman in white had. They reached and dug at the wires and ripped their skin and screamed for the cloud to meet them.

So the cloud rose.

The ones who lived on the ground took notice and started scaling the buildings. They saw all of the rich families start to hang, and they wanted what the hanging ones did. They wanted simply because it was something new. This wasn't a punch card. This wasn't a tearful boarding of the window as the cloud seeped into their apartment. This was a way out. This was a way to get what the rich wanted, and quicker. They couldn't hang into the cloud, but they could climb to it. Many of the buildings in the city were abandoned, so it wasn't difficult to do. Nor was it difficult to figure out which buildings were being used, since so many gasping bodies fell down then became silent. Mounds of them started to pop up around them, a wall that kept on rising high and higher. An abandoned moat for an abandoned castle, which only filled at night. So these castles began to pop up, all over the city. In every corner of every district, the mounds began to rise. Bodies spilled over into the streets, on top of cars. The highways began to clog up as they rolled off of the mounts and in front of cars. Ways out became ways in after enough began to spill over.

And once the ways out were removed, the more the reason to climb.

The police tried to get involved at one point, setting up barricades and starting to get violent, but a single police force couldn't stop an entire city. A squad of men would fire into a crowd only to have them rushed by planks and boards and knives. When the police stopped using rubber bullets, the citizens began to drive into them with their cars, throwing poorly made explosives from the roofs. Anyone who stood at their posts would be torn apart limb by limb. Their burial was through the falling ash piles that sputtered on top of their

uniforms before being silenced by another falling body. Soon, every part of the city was blocked off. Roads became too filled with the mounds to walk around. Everyone had to climb on the mounds to walk anywhere. Doorways were covered up, so people entered their homes through the first story windows. The smell filled entire blocks, making even more buildings deserted.

With jobs and markets and even food becoming blocked, there was no reason to pursue them. Making more reasons to start climbing. It was a cycle, one that would not be completed until there wasn't anyone left in the city at all.

So, it continued until the last man lived in the city.

The last man in the city sat on top of the tallest building he could find. He could enter the places where he would be shot on sight otherwise, because there were no more guards left to protect the rich families that had hung themselves like live bait for fish. The streets belonged to the dead, now. They hung in the cloud, dark blobs of ash that swung in the clouds. The cloud never vanished to the floor at night, now, since none of the lights ever turned on. They simply stayed in their little moats and lanes, content to become lazy rivers of black dust and fabric. They were black, now, the light brown haze turning darker as more people joined it. And they stretched up past the floors, past the upper floors. Any building that wasn't a skyscraper was completely covered. The rooftops were the only places he could breathe normally, now. He sat among the ghosts in their glass outfits. He had snapped the heads of the skeletons off, tossing them below. He couldn't stand them looking

at him. They never seemed quiet enough. They rattled when there were earthquakes. Like they were getting some final word out, and he was the only person who could hear them anymore. He didn't want to listen to them. He didn't want to listen to anything. He remembered seeing the lady in the cloud, all those years ago. He was one of the officers on the scene. The first to notice someone was hanging in the cloud. He was the one who called the detective force in, and the one who tried to pull her down only to reel back, coughing. He ran from the scene to get treated before any of the ash spread. To have a surgery to scrape the ash out of his lungs.

When he woke up, his doctors had shattered through the windows to jump out of them. That's how he had survived, all of those years. He was too afraid to stop and listen and see. And he was alone as a result. This was his punishment for finding her. He was alive. And the city was dead. And what a punishment this was.

He sat on the edge of the balcony for a long time, watching the cloud. It barely moved, anymore. Content to simply sit and feed on all the mounds down below. It made him laugh, gently. He was looking down on a map. A topographic map, on where the city had lived and died. Each mound was an elevation, a story of how each building rose and fell. Each hanging wire was the map itself, crossing over themselves until everything was organized. Now, which direction was north? His smile faded as he gazed around the city. The skyscrapers were pointed to look like arrows, sure, but they only pointed up. He glanced up, trying to figure out where

they went. He couldn't see anything above him. Just the endless black.

His mother told him a story that the stars had left them, a long time ago. He believed her then. He believed her now.

He believed in the woman in white.

The buildings pointed north, where all of the stars went as they abandoned them. He shifted his legs, slightly.

Gravity took over as he left himself fall to the south.

The first thing the residents found when entering the city was the hanging man in white.