Between 9 lives
Ujala Rehman

This year's fall, I'm older and wiser.
Autumn's withering trees zip past, Aminah's hips are pushed against mine, the warm pressure on my skin reverberates into a cold sensitivity on the hard bone underneath. My head is hovering out the window and I briefly entertain the idea of sticking my tongue out to feel the crisp breeze. Best not to do that, I decide quickly, the environment is distinctly feline, soft meows from the passenger seat remind me.

We arrive at the tiny, shabby apartment and carry Gul inside. The Vet flips her up, down and all the way around, feeling her cold little paws and shining His light into her squinting eyes. I watch her anointment with tired eyes, ears straining to pick up her coughs. They sound like an old woman's, so sleepy and frayed with a frosty fragility. They set the ambience of a 9th life, but nobody says anything about it. *Hypothermia*, He writes on the yellowed boarding register, we sign it and leave.

It isn't much of a surprise when we hear that she had died the next morning. It's a glimmer of grief in an otherwise lovely season. Nature is flourishing with unbridled progress, each fallen leaf releasing the promise of growth into the air. The air reeks of new beginnings, of moving on and healing. Gul is still dead and it's hard to be as content with it as I am with the bare trees lining the picturesque cricket ground. I force myself to think forward but the past comes hurtling out of me anyway, right into the toilet I'm kneeling in front of.

I cough out last spring's pansies like hairballs, with intense thrusts that shake my entire form. The coughs themselves are raspy and loud, the sounds of the struggle of a 7th life. They leave me dizzy, staring at my expulsions.

Last year's spring, I was older yet wiser.
I despised the spring. It's a contagion, a time where every horrid thing that haunted me blossomed and took over my entire perception. The pansies jeered at me with their yellows and purples, they clouded each thought, their pollen assaulting every orifice with a stinging sense of regret, the sharpest part of longing.

That day had all of spring's worst qualities, rebirth included. Lynn and Nabby hadn't done much to deserve the names they had been given when I found them, newly born and promptly abandoned, on a flowery windowsill. They were wet, red and so cold to the touch- yet so teeming with the warmth of life, it could be seen with each palpitation of their still-attached placentas. I peeled them off like the cheap Pansy stickers I used to decorate my childhood journal with, rushing to a hastily hailed cab, carrying two 1st lives in the folds of my shirt.

As the car zipped along the vivifying air, I looked straight into the passenger seat, burning holes through the leather, right through Rayyan's body, like if I kept my eyes on them, they would hold on. Maybe I should have spared a glance out the window to witness the mockings of the season, but I digress. We carried them inside the oddly shabby Vet's office building (I'd have expected a medical institution to be slightly more well-equipped), laying them onto the patchy white cushion covering a metal slab.

He arrived with a tiny bottle of toasty milk and stroked them up, down and all around with His gentle hands. He appeared without an equal, clad in all-white, and he knew exactly what to do. I watched the baptism, eyes full of awe, ears trying to catch their soft breaths and pattering heartbeat. It was a glimmer of hope in a rotten season when they mewled, such a sensitive and warm sound that cut through the cold plaster that had hardened around me.

It was devastating to hear that they had passed away that very night, never having opened their eyes to see the world. They had never felt the warmth of a mother's body, or suckled for her milk. They had lived and died on a mechanical pad that left their skin warm, yet never touching the cold that had settled in bone-deep, the cold that had finally suffocated their hot, rapidly beating hearts. It was just as devastating as the feverish blockage spring left in my sinuses, the sun failing to thaw my frozen senses. It was also no different to the tepid, flushed feeling Autumn breeze left on your cheeks, never ever hot enough.

I suppose that is what I was trying to articulate in another disappointingly underfunded medical institution, but it came out brasher than intended. The Therapist was on Her fifth *"I'm so sorry"* before the words just wheezed out of my pollen-sored throat,
"I just feel like I can do everything right- I don't drink, I don't smoke, I came here! I asked for help, and I tried my best that day to…to help them but it changes nothing! It never changes anything!"
She had looked at me with Her benevolent gaze, the circular pattern on the walls sitting as a halo above her head. Her voice, almost an echo, harmonized with the incessant ringing in my ears. She had told me it was going to be okay, and I had believed her.

I pull the flush.
Once the past has whirled away inside the porcelain seat, I gaze outside the stained glass of the compact, grimy window. The Moon overwhelms my view, suspended bright and wispy against the inky sky, it's nearly impossible to tell the time or the season or the year. Not that it matters anyway. I could be here on the night of Lynn and Nabby's birth or Gul's death and I would still be frozen.

Maybe if I knelt in front of the Moon all night, worshipping Her at my porcelain altar, She would leave my skin cool, and my heart searing with life again.

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