

PREFACE

The following fiction piece is an excerpt from a science fiction short story titled “The Lesser of Two Stars.” I submitted it to *The Catalyst* magazine at UCSB and was accepted and published in Fall Quarter of 2016. I wrote the first draft of the story about a year earlier and steadily edited and resubmitted it to publications until I received my acceptance from *The Catalyst*. I’ve included this older piece in my portfolio because it not only serves as a standard to gauge how my fiction writing has improved over the years, but also as evidence that hard work and editing can lead to clean, published work.

The Lesser of Two Stars

By Jamie Hu

They found me on the third level protruding from the wall like a troublesome fly, hair in my mouth and dust on my skin. My suit still reeked of the air vent through which I’d emerged, wild-eyed and dirty, panting with fear.

They sent soldiers after me, twelve of them, tiny ants that grew like balloons as they marched towards me. Each was five times the climber I was. Nevertheless, I shimmied up the wall as best I could, clinging tightly to cuts and scrapes in the concrete and desperately reminding myself to breathe.

I tumbled onto the fourth landing and barreled straight into a soldier who clamped his hand over my mouth. My nose filled with the rancid odor of my own breath and I whimpered, tasting the soldier’s skin on my tongue. Dust and ash, the smoky burn of dead gunfire. And something else, sweeter, like the sickly venom of a Venus flytrap, death wrapped in a soothing embrace.

I fell into it, my lips wet, the black eyes of the soldier above me telling me to sleep like the good girl I was. But I wasn’t a good girl. I was plastic when I should have been steel. I was barely a dent in his bulletproof vest, something a little off but not quite wrong enough to be bad. Not now, at least. They took me away in gentle arms, but I craved malice.

I woke in a meadow lying down, my face breaking through the tall yellow grass as if out of a swimming pool. I rose, dazed, and looked up to a blue sky swirling with white clouds. The wind cracked against my skin the instant I stood, seeds and sand nearly blocking my vision.

I squinted and spotted a small black square on the horizon. Lifting my skirts, I waded through the grass until the square ballooned into a perfect replica of my old house, its brick stairs disappearing into a sea of yellow stalks. Someone waved to me from its porch and I broke into a run, calling wildly, only to have my childhood recede like the retreating tide. I beat my bare feet against the dry earth, crying my sister’s name as she returned to the horizon like the faraway memory she was.

I fell to my knees, grabbing fistfuls of grass only to have them give under my fingers, soft and pliant. I found myself clutching white sheets, warm and velvety, folded into perfect inch-wide tiles as if by my mother's launderer hands. I stared at them, surprised, before pressing them to my nose and inhaling. Lavender, the smell of her soap. Tears prickled my eyes.

I rose at the sound of her song, quiet and lilting, just off-key enough to be human. She stood at the empty bed beside mine, folding its sheets into a stack that bent like an old tree. I tried to catch her attention, but she wouldn't look at me. I then scooted towards her, reaching out with yearning fingers, but she shied away from me like I dripped poison.

I was determined, however, and darted at her, latching onto her arm and crying her name when my hands suddenly met and I crashed to moist, brown earth. Rain spattered my face as I looked up and found myself before her grave, a warm wound cut from my memories. I'd visited her once, dressed in my rebel's uniform, my sister beside me.

"We were good girls," I'd said to her stone, wilted flowers in my hands. "We fought your war. You should be proud."

Her stone had been silent, but I'd heard her voice in my ear, rough and grating and soldier through and through.

"But I wanted you to live."