

What we Feed

by Maya Ribeiro

The garbage truck comes at dawn and I am always waiting for it, pressed against my bedroom window like a lover watching for her beloved's return. The driver has arms thick as tree trunks and when he throws the bags into the truck's metal mouth, I can see the mountain growing, one breakfast's worth of orange peels and coffee grounds at a time. The hydraulic whine of the compactor sounds like a giant's hunger, crushing bone and dream alike into digestible fragments. He doesn't know that every bag he collects is a love letter addressed to the place where I learned what hunger really means. The truck's mechanical jaw opens and closes with the rhythm of breathing, swallowing whole families' worth of shame in black plastic skins. I watch tampons and condoms disappear into its gullet alongside moldy bread and broken Christmas ornaments, democracy of disposal where everything rots at the same rate. The smell that wafts up when the compactor crushes a fresh load is sweet decay mixed with industrial lubricant, the perfume of civilization's bowel movements.

I was seven when my mother first took me to see the mountain, back when it was still small enough to call a hill, still young enough to be embarrassed about its appetite. She

drove us there on a Tuesday afternoon when my father was at work and the house felt too clean, too quiet, too much like a museum of things we weren't allowed to touch.

"This is where everything goes," she told me, and I pressed my face to the car window and watched the bulldozers push trash around like they were rearranging furniture in god's living room, massive yellow beasts with steel teeth tearing through the accumulated evidence of ten thousand lives lived without consideration for consequence.

The mountain taught me that love is just another word for consumption, that desire is the act of turning one thing into another thing until the original becomes unrecognizable. I watched families arrive with trailers full of furniture that had witnessed decades of arguments, beds where children had been conceived and where marriages had died, dining room tables that had hosted last suppers and birthday parties for children who would grow up to hate their parents. Everything beautiful eventually becomes garbage if you love it hard enough, if you hold it close enough to leave fingerprints on its surface.

The bulldozers worked the mountain like surgeons, cutting into its flesh to expose layers of history compressed into geological time. Old televisions from the eighties lay crushed beneath bags of yard waste that would never become soil, their cathode ray

tubes exploding in small pops of violence when the weight became too much. Children's toys missing limbs and eyes created graveyards of innocence, plastic casualties of outgrown joy scattered among disposable diapers heavy with the weight of bodily functions no one wants to acknowledge. I watched my mother throw away my baby clothes, my broken toys, my report cards with their red ink bleeding like small wounds, and I understood that this was how time worked—by transforming the precious into the disposable, by teaching us that nothing lasts except the act of discarding.

My mother had hands like small birds, nervous and quick, and she was always throwing things away with the desperate efficiency of someone trying to stay ahead of accumulation. Not just the obvious trash—the empty milk cartons leaking sour disappointment, the newspapers yellow with age and lies—but pieces of herself, scraps of dreams she'd had before she learned that wanting things was dangerous for women like us. She threw away the college application she'd filled out but never sent, the paper soft with handling and hope. The phone number of the boy who'd asked her to coffee became confetti in the kitchen trash, mixed with eggshells and used tissues, romance rotting alongside organic matter. All of it went to the mountain, all of it became part of its growing body, feeding the hunger that could never be satisfied because it was fed by the act of feeding itself.

I learned to read the mountain's moods by watching what people brought to it, studying the seasonal migrations of different kinds of waste. During divorce season, it would swell with wedding dresses and photo albums, white fabric stained with the gray reality of love that had fermented into something sour. The dresses would lie spread across the garbage like the skins of shed selves, satin and lace mixing with banana peels and cigarette butts. After the holidays, the mountain would feast on broken toys and uneaten fruitcake, on the gap between what we hoped Christmas would feel like and what it actually delivered. Toy soldiers missing heads created battlefields of plastic carnage, evidence of childhood wars fought with the weapons of consumer capitalism.

The mountain had its own ecosystem, its own weather patterns that existed independently of the natural world. The seagulls that circled its peak had learned to love the taste of rotten meat, their digestive systems adapting to process antibiotics and growth hormones. Their calls sounded like the laughter of women who had given up pretending to be satisfied with scraps, harsh and knowing and stripped of melodic beauty. The rats that tunneled through its depths had grown fat and fearless, their bodies adapting to toxic cocktails that leached from batteries and electronics, their eyes bright with the intelligence that comes from living constantly on the edge of poisoning. They moved through the mountain's intestines like blood cells through arteries,

breaking down larger pieces into components that could be processed by bacteria and fungi.

My mother started visiting the mountain alone when I turned sixteen and began to resemble the girl she'd been before she learned to make herself smaller. I would find her there sometimes, parked at the overlook with her hands pressed against the steering wheel like she was trying to hold something together. She never brought anything to throw away on these visits, arriving emptyhanded as if the mountain might give her something instead of taking it away. She just sat and watched the trucks dump their loads, watched the mountain grow bigger and hungrier and more magnificent in its refusal to apologize for taking up exactly as much space as its appetite required. I think she was trying to understand what the mountain knew that she didn't—how to consume without shame, how to take up exactly as much room as your hunger demanded, how to grow larger instead of smaller with each passing year. The mountain had learned to love its own expansion, to celebrate accumulation, to transform garbage into geography with confidence. My mother had learned the opposite—to shrink, to apologize, to turn her hunger inward until it consumed her from the inside out, eating her dreams like acid until only the shell remained.

The mountain taught me that everything ends up as trash eventually, but trash doesn't end—it simply changes form, changes address, changes the story it tells about itself.

The apple core becomes soil becomes tree becomes apple becomes core again in endless transformation. The broken bottle becomes sand becomes glass becomes bottle becomes fragments that cut bare feet on summer beaches. The love letter becomes pulp becomes paper becomes another love letter written by hands that have never touched the ones that wrote the first. Nothing disappears. Everything just changes address.

I started bringing my own offerings to the mountain when I was nineteen and bleeding for reasons I couldn't name. I brought it my diary entries about boys who'd never learned how to touch me without taking something away, pages documenting the slow education I'd received in the difference between being wanted and being valued. I brought it my college rejection letters and job applications and attempts at poems that sounded too much like my father. I brought it the pregnancy test that had two lines instead of one, relief and terror of choice made manifest in plastic and piss.

The mountain accepted everything without judgment, consuming confession and celebration with equal appetite. It understood that shame is just compost that hasn't finished decomposing yet, that regret is simply energy that hasn't found its proper form. It knew that the difference between waste and wealth is just a matter of

perspective, that today's garbage is tomorrow's foundation, that everything discarded eventually becomes the ground on which something new can grow.

But the mountain also taught me about the weight of accumulation, about what happens when you spend your life adding without ever taking away. I watched it grow beyond the boundaries the city had set for it, watched it spill into neighboring lots and creep toward the highway like a slowmotion avalanche of appetite. The mountain had learned to love its own hunger so much that it had forgotten how to be satisfied, had become addicted to consumption until the eating became more important than what was being eaten.

My mother died on a Tuesday, and I brought her ashes to the mountain even though her will had specified the ocean. The ocean seemed too clean for her, too vast and impersonal, too willing to dilute her into something unrecognizable. I scattered her gray dust over the garbage and watched the wind carry her into the seagulls' wings, into the rats' tunnels, into the decomposing matter that would eventually become soil in the endless cycle of consumption that the mountain had taught me was the only honest form of love.

The mountain accepted her like it had accepted everything else—without ceremony, without judgment, without the need to transform her into something she had never been. She became part of its body the way food becomes part of the body that consumes it. She finally found a place that would let her take up as much space as she needed, that would grow larger to accommodate her presence instead of asking her to shrink to fit.

I still visit the mountain, though it's bigger now, more complex, more dangerous in its beauty. It has developed its own gravitational pull that draws garbage trucks from neighboring counties, that pulls people seeking a place to dispose of the parts of themselves they can no longer carry. The mountain has taught me that everything I throw away becomes part of someone else's landscape, that every discarded dream becomes compost for someone else's garden, that the act of disposal is also the act of creation. It has shown me that love is not preservation but transformation, not keeping but letting go, not holding tight but learning when to open your hands and let what you've been carrying find its own way to become something else.

The garbage truck comes at dawn and I am always waiting for it, but now I know what I'm really watching for—not the arrival of waste but the beginning of alchemy, not the end of use but the start of metamorphosis, not the disposal of the unwanted but the

delivery of raw material to the place where everything discarded learns how to become necessary again. In the sound of the hydraulic compactor crushing another load of human refuse, I hear the heartbeat of a world that has learned to love what it consumes, that has discovered that the most honest relationships are built not on what we keep but on what we're brave enough to throw away