

What Remains of Familiarity

by Sarah Licht

I used to walk through the old Walmart when it shut down, between when a nameless storm caved a few of the windows in, and a few faceless workers swept the floors hard enough that corporate reopened the location. Nothing to do but watch mice scurry around and leaves continue to blow through the shattered windows. But I went every week that summer before I pierced my ears and learned that deodorant and bras were quickly becoming necessary. Noa was waiting there on my fifth expedition. They gave a small wave and offered me a greasy chip, asked if I'd heard of urban exploration. Noa was older, had hair that flopped down across their forehead, gauges larger than a nickel, traveled to abandoned buildings across Boca Raton and built kingdoms in old concrete husks overrun by vines and weeds. Nature, human, ready to be conquered. I made the choice to come every day after that.

We ventured to the gas station, the K-Mart, an old gym, marked our territory like wolves in the night. Each spot had a name: Love, Gender, Anonymity. We danced on their remains under the July sky and stole cigarettes and Slurpees. Noa taught me how to stop a chest from bursting into bloom, how to pack and unpack, how to smile at the world and say, I am not you, and that is alright. I wish I could say I taught them anything: to see in my eyes how much I longed for our nights together, how Boca was a fine place to live as long as we were us forever. We named our final kingdom Familiarity, the same night I saw their parents and cried when Noa wore a thin smile and said, this is my friend. Friend became a slur, rancid like 'honey' or 'babe.'

Familiarity fell. A new Mexican restaurant rose from its ashes. The gas station was repainted a welcoming teal, the Walmart reopened, and 'us forever' wasn't enough to keep them in Boca. Noa's parents had no answers: they wouldn't tell them which kingdom they would conquer next, which plot of empty walls they would reign over. I found an abandoned park, more dirt than grass, rusted and perfect. I named it Us, We, thousands of words I wish I taught them and danced beneath the stars. I made the choice to wait there, for the distant lights to grow closer.