

# Dig The Void

Early winter in Portland, and night falls so early—it's mid-evening and pitch-black dark outside as I step into the No. 4 bus. I show the driver my pass, turn away from him, and freeze. There, in the first row, sits Marshall, engrossed in a thick fantasy novel, the white wire of his iPod headphones leading out of his ears.

Weeks ago, he and I broke up, concluding our relationship with mature discussion of the irreconcilable differences between us, a stoic hug. Our split had no great drama, no emotional theatrics, no animosity. However, all that is beside the point on the bus in the stormy night: I am simply not ready to see him here. I rush down the aisle, praying to whatever deity may exist that he not look up from his book, that whatever song playing in his ears stays loud and engaging. I get to the back of the bus, brush past an elderly man to wedge myself into the far left corner of the bench, continuing to pray for invisibility.

The fact that change is necessary and inevitable doesn't escape me intellectually. Strangely, this has even been a factor in several of my breakups, my frank willingness for my world to change reading as a form of personal instability to some of my partners. It mystifies me—*What makes you think you can halt change?* I always wonder. *Why would you want to resist*



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

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*and be a stubborn stone when the river of time will just wear you down to nothing?* However, in the dark of winter, when the calendars change and the reckoning comes upon me as it has here on the bus, the metaphors and the philosophical distance fail to comfort me. The pain of change still knocks the wind out of me, leaving me to shiver and hide.

"Why hello, handsome," I hear, and turn my head anxiously. Oh, thank God—it's Leni, my fabulous beatnik neighbor, a self-professed "gay man within an old Jewish lady's body." She slides elegantly into the seat next to me.

"Oh, Leni," I sigh with gratitude. "So good to see you."

"How are you holding up, kid?"

"Oh.... You know, things have been better."

She looks to the front of the bus, recognizes the back of Marshall's head, turns to me with

a knowing look in her wrinkled eyes. "Oh, honey... it's the void!" she exclaims. "There's always a void when someone leaves. I get so tired of people leaving." She pulls up the collar of her green coat, the fur lining brushing against her face. "Not just capital-R Relationships, either—people dying, quitting their jobs, moving on through life." She slides a slim silver case out of her pocket, opens it and removes a Dunhill. "I take it as a sign I need to keep moving on, too."

I sigh again, and Leni puts her tiny, soft hand onto mine. "It hurts every time, the void. Now, though, when I see it, I just try to remember how it looked the last time I saw it. How I looked in front of it, what I did afterward. Then it's just like a medicine—it tastes awful, but you get better for taking it. That's how I learned to dig the void."

Leni is right. Everything that leaves us, our lovers and time and the old year passing, creates a void that we are forced to stare into wide-eyed. We can be hypnotized by it, frozen into stillness until more and more things leave us, the void consuming everything; we can also view it as an invitation for motion,

a familiar reminder to stay dynamic. The void can be a crucible, reminding us that the heat and force of the world will forge us into whatever it needs us to be, that we must adapt when it informs us that it is time for something to stop.

We arrive at 12th Avenue—I pull the cord, the bus stops, Marshall doesn't turn around as Leni and I step off. Outside of the bus, rain knocks the yellow leaves from the trees, wind blows them in bright clouds over Division Street. Raindrops run over my face as I look in the bus window at my personal history seated therein. Just as the stoplight changes from red to green, I raise my hand up to wave. "Goodbye," I say silently, to Marshall, to a past that inevitably yields to the present, to the departing year. The bus speeds away, and for a moment I keep waving, the "goodbye" turning into a "hello," greeting the void and the lessons I'll have to learn from it this time, welcoming the future and whatever it holds.

Leni looks over, takes the cigarette from her lips, smiles at me. "Just keep moving," she says softly, and I smile back at her. Quietly, thoughtfully, we walk into the darkness. ☐

NICK MATTOS is still learning how to dig the void. Send coping mechanisms to [nickmattos@justout.com](mailto:nickmattos@justout.com).

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