

A City Contemplates Its Existence at the End of the World
by Sean Robinson

It is the nature of a City to provide five things: identity, purpose, limit, succor, and challenge. But, it wondered, did it need citizens? For a City of no little history, breathing the last sunlight of a flickering star, there was nothing else for it to consider.

Her thoroughfares stood empty, each alley and walk reflected a City distilled until each street, bazaar, palace of her were the dreams of poets and the lifework architects left unfulfilled.

She was called the Rising Star, nestled like a child cradling the dawn with her spire-fingers. She was the first in all the world. Mother of Cities, her children spread west like pollen to fill the barren spaces of the world. Other Cities nestled in the crags, in the flatlands and spread and grew, but each child City looked towards the dawn, to make sure their mother watched them play.

In the hollow emptiness, her spires echoed nothing that did not come from lips long gone to dust. Each block of marble, string of filigree, each pearl-laid gutter held the murmur of the jewel markets a century before, the hawking of the bazaar when the pilgrims came. For a City

empty like an overturned cup, she held each sound like a gift.

They called her Holy Mother, once. Before pomegranate stained the skies, before the world moved on. If she held as still as she could she could almost feel the knees of penitents kneeling to honor the dawn. A hundred, a million. She was the cask from which they drank salvation. Her streets rang with the danced steps that shook them free of what they left behind.

The Rising Star, she caressed the wine-bruised sea, drank of the light as though it were persimmon juice, held to her voices her memories as a child holds butterflies.

It is not fair to say the Holy Mother was a child—no, she was the daughter of time her, buildings weighted down by the hours and the years, shorn up by the backs of the buried dead. The blood of her children and her people were the secret crimson mortar for her battlements.

Her hidden places, she held to the sight of her legions, mantled with the spray of peacock feathers across their shoulders. The City had cheered with them their victories, and guarded them in her marble vaults as they fell. They were treasured beside every promise whispered when her streets had filled as blood filled the veins of her kings and queens.

When war came to her, pierced her walls like the armor of her defenders, she screamed and rallied each babe and daughter and simple wife to war. She, no less than they, cried glory to the City. And when the deaths were counted and the limed skulls were set upon her great towers—she caroled dominion of the earth.

To succor, her canals and causeways grew with poppy and lavender. Her gentle green places held the laughs of children singing songs in a dozen languages. The Holy Mother gave herself freely to lovers with broken hearts and sultry smiles. In summer her gardens hid their trysts. In winter, when the black birds circled, she hid the bodies of the fools who would do her people harm.

Perhaps, she thought as the sun faded on the last day—as the flickering light cast shadows on her stones, and the sea pulled away from her empty docks, the challenge had been living at the beginning of the world. So few were good enough for the Rising Star. Not enough to wear the peacock mantle, to dance their sins away, or pray to the dawn. That—she thought as the sky bruised for the last time—was why they had left. They could not be strong enough to walk her perfect streets or sing in her gardens. In the end, she would remember them for trying; love them for failing her

and going...wherever they went. No, she decided as the
darkness came for the last time. She was still a City.