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The Space Between

by Alicia Pitts

Walking into the upper level of Sainte-Chapelle is like a burst of music resounding before you, where the notes are tangible and silent. The rounded supports of the walls are gold eloquence, shooting up into ribbed groin vaults painted with blue night and golden stars. The air you breathe is no longer of the physical world, but one entirely ensconced in stained glass.

Instead of barring the outside world from the inside, the walls reduce it, purify it until all that remains is sunlight and colors that glow copper and burgundy and royal blue. The only opaque surface in sight is the tile floor beneath your feet, the vaulted ceiling, and the pillars that join the two, trapping you between.

The very nature of describing the chapel falls short. It is inimitable in anything but its purest state: divinity. Sainte-Chapelle is a distinct example of the French Rayonnant style of Gothic architecture. It is as if the builders set a rose window atop the skeleton of a chapel and left it to melt in the heat of the sun until its glass stretched and oozed down the spindle-thin stone ribs and set overnight.

In a period of less than a hundred years, Rayonnant style flourished and faded, a time between the thir-

teenth and fourteenth centuries, where quality of space above quantity of space became the new ideal. You step into a room where the very walls are art. Gilt chandeliers hang, weightless, in space, lighting the windows from inside as the sun streams in from the outside. Light transcends functionality into necessity. Darkness is as incomprehensible as ever returning to the real world.

My family and I do, though, and stepping back out onto the cobblestone streets of Paris where the exterior is nothing but an unassuming mass of gray stone is jarring in the least. Colors are duller, colder, even though it's the middle of June and the city boils in heat.

It's as if some greater being has doused the fire over the world and I can only look back on the ember of what I know is still throbbing inside the chapel's walls with molten gold.

In the evening, however, we return, and knowing what to expect somehow makes stepping back inside even more stunning. We approach from the balcony, ferried in with a line of guests showing bent tickets at the door.

We're sitting this time, rooted to the floor, necks stretched upwards. On my left my sister shuffles her purse under her chair while my parents on my right murmur between themselves. The chairs are packed so tightly into rows that I have to tuck my elbows in close to my body, back rigid, but it's barely a

sacrifice at all.

The program opens with Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* and the moment that the first violinist's bow lifts to play the first note, my body and mind split.

Spring is a joyous celebration of life, a harmony of yellow and gold glass and trills that spring through the air in delicate arcs of lead.

I float somewhere through the chandeliers, carried on waves of vibrato. The air that fills my lungs is the same that existed when Vivaldi penned the poems accompanying his music. And though seasons do not occur in a birdhouse of stone and glass with webs of Baroque harmonies strung between the arches of the vaulted ceiling, damp spring flowers grow in cracks of tile and the gentle murmur of rain slips over marble.

Spring eases into summer and the breath between broadens the room like a sigh filling a chest. I imagine those who have listened to the sounds of nature in nothing but the vibrations of air, how many have heard two hundred and ninety years' worth of this one combination of notes. How many of their hearts have raced to the storms that rise with the point of an arch and burst from the ceiling like liquid sound?

Autumn processes in, triumphant, and the sun pouring in through the rose window behind my head glows burnt orange and blue. The space above our heads does not fill with empty air,

but rather the light of 3,221 square feet of glass that bleeds color and bows on strings that bleed chords. Dust drifts on cerulean threads of F major.

Staccato bursts of snow and sleet pluck away warmth until the space of our bodies packed into chairs is covered in a blanket of minor chords. I drift somewhere down through the blizzard and seep back into myself, breathing, flushed, between two walls of stained glass, the empty space rich with eddies of harmony and melody, intertwining, rolling through and over each other.

The moment between the last echo of the final chord suspends on a single breath, the lift of a bow, and in those two seconds, there is nothing but green-gold beams of light and silence hanging like spider webs.