

WHAT MEN ARE TOLD TO CARRY

Ruth Ladip-Ladwington

**inspired by the shared narratives of abuse against men in upper Tanudan communities in the Cordilleras of Northern Philippines*

They hand him a name before he learns to speak:
 strong, they say—
as if strength were a room
 with no windows.

In the mountains of his becoming,
he is taught the language of endurance:
 how to swallow grief whole,
 how to rename fear as anger,
how to bury tenderness beneath laughter
 that never quite reaches the eyes.

No one tells him
that the mind can fracture quietly—
 not with thunder,
but with the slow drip of unspoken things.

He wakes each day
with a storm folded behind his ribs,
a weather system no one forecasts:
 shame moving like fog,
anxiety pacing like a caged animal,
 sadness settling
in the hollow spaces between breaths.

But men are not supposed to name these things.

So he says,
 “I’m just tired,”
when the weight is existential.
 “I’m fine,”
when sleep has abandoned him.
 “It’s nothing,”
when everything inside is unraveling.

He becomes fluent
in the art of disappearance—
 present in body,
 absent in spirit,
a quiet erosion no one applauds,
 no one interrupts.

And still,
somewhere beneath the ruin of expectation,
a softer voice insists:

*You are allowed to feel this.
You are allowed to break.
You are allowed to ask.*

Not because you are weak,
but because you are human—
and the mind, like any living thing,
needs tending.

What if strength
is not the absence of suffering,
but the courage
to be witnessed in it?

What if healing begins
when a man sets down
what he was never meant to carry alone—
and finds, in the sharing,
not shame,
but breath?



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