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The Vernal Pool

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Author

Ray, Chloe

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CHLOE RAY
THE WAYWARD SPIRIT



THE VERNAL POOL

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She's got her own movements across the sand. Not steady, sporadic she is as she traces her long silver fingers through the desert's dust. Can you see her? No, neither can I. She eludes me yet. But her voice, it echoes, up and above the balconies of conscious reasoning. And down far below the twisted forthcomings of hidden desires. Along this thin line of the segregation of one's radiating soul is where she plays. Fingers long, voice enticing. Laughing, laughing within the wind and amongst the stars above me.

Tonight again I try my luck. The moon sits crouched above us, it is yellow, soiled, large and looming. Dead light beads are woven within that rich black sky. The wind too is sullen tonight as it drags itself against my feet, raising and dropping grains of sand. I wrap my scarf tighter around my face, revealing my smile only in my eyes. I use them now to glance over at the boy. He stands adjacent to me, just a few paces off. Scanning the horizons with squinted eyes he clutches onto the camel's reins. Lips chapped, face a sun-baked white, and nose a shy red. I know he feels me watching, and so begins to unpack our belongings from the camel's back. A mohair blanket each, a few tin pots, and a meager fistful of carcass to last until it doesn't. The boy begins to start up a lick of fire.

This land is not ours. It is foreign to myself and to the boy. The camel, I do not know about its standing here within the desert. Though I wonder about the people from whom it departed. We came across them only once on this journey. They are the vagabonds. Trekking along the wasteland, they travel in groups of about a score. No belongings. No names. No voices. No skin. Bloody pink flesh hidden under the ripped skin of camels and coyotes in which they cloak themselves. Their eyes are swollen and bulging from their hideous bodies, two holes for noses, and lipless, teeth baring always clenched. As the brim of modernism conquered and raged against the unspoken hymns of myth and

magic, the revolution to uncover all truths lead to the capture and discovery of a clutch of these vagabonds. Tearing off their makeshift shells of borrowed pelts, the conquerors were overcome with a ghastly sight upon these heathens. Since then, there has been a rich bounty to capture and kill the folk. But I think it's impossible. You do not go to them, they go to you. Why they decided to allow the conquerors to see themselves under the spotlight of truth that one night, I do not know. But it was when they approached me and the boy, two weeks back, that I came to this realization.

Our rations were depleted. We lay dying under the smiling sun. There was no more of anything or nothing in my once-was of a body. It became just that, a body. A mess of rotting flesh. My final thoughts, ah, I did not even think. Upon death there is nothing left to feel nor to think. But maybe, maybe that is just me. Regardless, in the wake of the dying contrast which is that of the blind light of a dark death did they come. A grotesque pink face looked down on me. Teeth chattered and its eyes touched and moved along my vulnerable body. It was looking for something that it could not find. Then abruptly, a scream. I raised my head and saw the boy. Shaking, he moved away from the bent-backed creatures. Two pinks, the rest standing farther aback under their cloaks. One pink stood near me, head also craned towards the boy. The other stood in front of the boy, reaching out to him with his long skeleton fingers. Bits of flesh fell unto the steaming sizzle of sand. This caused the boy to release another uproar of fear as he scrambled back. His feet flailing underneath him. The pink returned to his group and within an unspoken conversation heard not even by the eavesdropping wind, they parted ways to reveal a beast. The camel. One camel walked past the split of creatures and past the pink heathen and past myself and unto the boy. Along the camel's back was food wrapped in palm leaves and water encased in animal liver. Since then, every night they trace our movements with their glowing eyes in the far-off distance.

I squinted. The fire cracked and wavered as the boy pricked it with a stick. The moon had been raised higher above us, and the hour of her arrival was soon approaching. The night was growing late, and myself more anxious. I spit into the flame.

“What is it?” he asks. A broken voice. No way for a child to sound.

“Nothing.”

He stared at me, scowling.

“I said nothing.”

“Bel, we’ll find’er today.”

“Don’t speak. Save your energy for when she comes.”

Stupid kid. Stubborn and stupid. At least he is not arrogant like too many folk, myself included. I let my head fall back, the brimming speckling sea of night above me. The hair along my arm gravitates toward the beauty, and that is how I know. Her presence, her lines, they begin to draw themselves around us. You see, we have come a number of times within the proximity of her existence. A taunting laugh clips at our ears from the distance of all directions. She waits and watches from the silver dunes just yonder. It is what she does. The desert is a flatbed upon daylight, and upon the uncertainty that resides within the monochrome dark she grows dunes. A platform, she skips and dances from one to another. All around us spinning and laughing, laughing and spinning. But will she torment me like this every time? The anticipation is enough to kill, you see it is the only feeling I have left. I have become a corpse chasing the reeking scent of her. I shake, violently and more and more every day. My stomach stabs itself constantly, a sharp and dreadful pain. Many days I wonder if I even move along this desert or if it is the desert that moves around me.

The fire light limps to a low dim without the prod of the boy who has fallen asleep under his blanket. I too, find myself succumbing to the toils of pure exhaustion.

The uncertainty of reality strips away unto the certainties of a perished past. I am greeted with the same dream every night. The mingled memories of my individual history. Many years, months, moons ago, I was a person, a person just, and no more. Right in my ways is how I behaved. For this, I was rewarded well and pleasantly with the engagement of a woman. To be soon married and blessed with the growing of a life within her I had become a man who was envied. Even I couldn't help but envy myself from just moments previous; "oh what I happy man I was then," I'd repeat over to myself as I strode along my day. But it was one day in particular that changed me.

I decided, this day, to take a single last longing look at my recently purchased home to ensure it was up to perfect standards. In other words, to make sure it was good enough to house my soon wife and soon child. Ah yes, I can still feel the autumn sunset leaning against my back that late afternoon, ushering me in to my future. As it certainly did. White walls, a sturdy staircase, and old wide windows that allowed in gracious amounts of light. Healthy and well this house felt as I traced my fingers along the wall. You can imagine now, a man, on the brim of a promising future, he must surely have been ecstatic. Chest wide with pride. But I know you see. I know what you are expecting now. A man wasted in a wasteland and a man standing face front and glad towards his future are two parallels. A demise awaits, and it is what you wait for. What we all wait for.

There was one room. The room was soon to belong to the child that was soon to be. It was small and close to our masters' chambers. It was then and there in that snow white room adorned with nothing but a single mirror that it happened. Within the span of

the next few collection of moments was when I died for the first time. Right upon the pinnacle of the sun's death and on its instant brink of decay did it splatter that room with a sharp rush of rich orange blood. My eyes strayed to the mirror simultaneously with the sun's final moment of existence. The sun sank and I was brought with it. And when the sun rose again I found myself here in another land of this desert with this boy and this camel.

Now the sky was a full black surge. Moonless, and the stars had shied away. No shadows crept individually but became one whole. Nothing moved and nothing existed alone in this atmosphere. All but her. Then instantly, the wind snatched at us, stealing with it the flags of the small flame. I stood with the boy by my side, among the churning sands underneath. Grains of the shattered past grinded against each other in excitement of her endearing movement towards us. The night had devoured us then, we stood isolated upon the charcoal sea now. The onslaught of darkness was brief as the familiar gaze of lights stood around us at a safe distance. Safe from what? The lights, were they the vagabonds? I prickled and shook and my eyes darted, my body twisted, my voice cracked, my thoughts roamed all so quickly, instantly everything began to move in the blind darkness. But where was she? The laughter, the laughter of madness grew louder as it beat itself against our ears. Drumming, drumming, you can hear now the crunch of her bare sole of foot along the sand. Moving through the sand she approaches, I can feel it but I cannot see. I cannot see! I cannot see!

Ah!

This is when I died the second time. Not by the madness of the approaching, but of the rage and careful caution of my ally. That's right. The boy who disappeared along with the camel and flame and vagabonds and her had come back. With him he brought back the lights. The stars and the moon and the glare of

the cannibals waiting. Disgusting heathens. As my blood pooled underneath me I could hear their groans of hunger and saliva dripping through the crevices of their teeth. Waiting for me to fall so they could collapse unto my skin and tear it from my own pink flesh. I would not go with them. I refused to go with them until I had discovered the truth of my second death. He spoke first.

“Why did you do it?”

I did not respond.

“Bel, I followed you through this whole damn desert watching you lose your mind. Waiting for the right moment to kill you. This is mercy. Now you tell me, why’d you do it?”

“You’re just a boy, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m eighteen. I am no child ‘Bel.”

“You’ve killed me.”

“You killed my mother.”

“All this death and darkness. Sickening isn’t it? Boy, focus instead on the beautiful happy sun and the kind heathens who saved our hopeless lives that day.”

Silence. So I continued.

“I loved her.”

“I did too.” Tears elbowed at his brown muddy eyes. Poor boy.

I looked for the last time. At what? At everything under the night sky.

A beautiful world, I thought to myself.

The moon was always there.

The boy was never a child.

There was never a 'she.'

Perhaps, the man thought, perhaps the wayward spirit that taunted him so never did exist. Perhaps indeed his mind had wilted and decayed upon that moment of realization. That singular most important moment of any when he looked into the mirror. He saw what he really was, what he had always been, and what he would mutate into. The man had once loved a woman and he had once killed a woman. The wayward spirit followed him into madness, and the man had worn madness like a patchwork pelt. His eyes became swollen and bulging from his hideous body, had two holes for a nose, and lipless teeth baring always clenched.