

The Water's Skin

Here I stood by the lake's edge, beneath the pale beams of the sun's rays as they faded past the horizon. Colors refracted upon the water's gleaming surface. Menacing red and shattering yellow danced beside cryptic purple and icy blue. I looked out; the lake was a sight that may have been breathtaking once, but that time has passed, and it stole my breath no longer. Maybe I should have seen this coming, maybe I should have known this would happen, but I was a fool, I stood there doe-eyed and unassuming as I was destroyed piece by piece, bit by bit.

I had figured I was stronger than others, for in my place they would have been broken. I wasn't broken though, or maybe... I was. Everyone was always so concerned, therapists assured me that I could tell them anything. I replied that I had already told them everything. To which I was only met with a face brimming full of pitiful smiles and knowing eyes. "How do you feel?" they would ask. I would always reply the same, over and over every time, "Fine." Skeptical looks are what I got in return for my honest answer. Some days, when I was feeling up to it, I would try to explain, "Of course I wish it didn't happen, but it did. I have moved on. I'm fine." The faces told me they didn't understand, didn't think I spoke the truth. Eventually though they let it go and came to believe, maybe I was fine after all.

That was years ago. If the past could be measured, every hour an inch, it would have been close to the height of the Eiffel Tower doubled. However, the past has a funny way of catching up with you. Even if you never run from it. My past is a mosquito hovering around me. I keep my eyes on it, making sure it doesn't bite me until it flies away, but then I feel an itch and look down and see that it bit my arm, even under my watchful gaze, but only now did I feel it. I didn't

react until it was long gone. That stupid mosquito. So stupid. I am stupid, I should have smashed the mosquito. But I didn't and now here I am, part of me stolen, but most of me here.

That must be why I thought I emerged unscathed. I was there. I wasn't bleeding or sick, I was fine. But if the small part they steal is the most important, the part that makes you you, then are you ok? If you are a china cabinet but the china is taken, then are you still a china cabinet or are you merely a simple cabinet no longer with purpose? This thought passed through my mind but I cast it aside. I was oblivious and ignorant. I was blind to what should have been glaringly obvious. But so was everyone else. No one else saw the cracked china doll that stood before them, beside them, or else they ignored it. Eyes passed over the hollow shell that failed to notice it had been carved empty. Is it my fault or is it their fault we didn't see? They tried once as the mosquito still hovered around my head, coaxing me to smash it, to kill it. I ignored their advice, and they grew tired of trying to change my mind. It is my fault in the end.

What might have happened if I took their advice, would I be standing here, by the lake's edge with eyes which no longer saw beauty? The view would have been radiant in my mind I resolved. It would have been a long, withstanding memory with an entirely different meaning than that of it presently. They told me to tell them everything, but I didn't know everything. I thought I was stronger. Thought this sad story was just a story. It looked like it when viewing the outline, the summary. Just the facts, they didn't tell of emotions, didn't speak of when I snapped. I was a broken clock that just kept on ticking, even though my hands were missing and my face was cracked.

I always go back to that day, everytime I close my eyes. I wish I didn't see them, rewind the clock to when I was once again unassuming, yet I will in time forever be frozen, replaying

those circumstances, as I desperately wish for change, wish for a way to prevent their demise. How I wish I could see them again, how I wish I could unsee their last moments.

What were we to do? What was I supposed to do? Anywhere else I would have run home, but I *was* home. How could I leave? If I were that vexatious mosquito I know what I would have seen, three kids with blanched faces and terror-struck expressions. I was detached from myself, as if my body were only mine in name, as if I buzzed around the room, leeching off of the suffering thick in the air. I could no longer tell where I was, the next moments a blur, a grain of sand falling in the hourglass. He tied them up as if they were caterpillars, covered in rope from their shoulders to their feet, slicing our skin with every sound we made. He made me sit in the front lawn, tied and gagged, facing the front of my house. If only someone else had been on that street, perhaps things would have been different. He slapped their faces, pinched their cheeks, wanting them conscious before he tied them from the eaves, chrysalises ready for metamorphosis.

He tossed the sun at my house, setting it ablaze, the vermilion tongues licking up the boards. He took harsh hold of my chin, forcing my gaze to meet their eyes as the flames edged closer. I couldn't close my eyes, for if I did he promised worse. Both their gazes are scarred into my mind eternally, never again would I close my eyes to inviting blackness, the back of my eyelids are painted with their images.

Her face was an awful beauty with its stark contrast against the raging red of the fire engulfing her, even as it hung upside down. Her expression so horrified, so petrified, so feral. Her mouth was open until the end. Forever a silent scream.

He was as bright as the fire surrounding him, all the blood rushing to his head. His suffering as acute as her's, but his was one of torture and anguish. His face warped into an almost unrecognisable mass, from which one could only discern one thing: third degree torment.

As the fire spread over what once was my home, engulfing everything in its path, I could only watch in mute horror. I could only watch as the flames licked at the ropes, singeing their flesh. I could only watch as the flames leapt, the ropes frayed, the cocoons wiggled, vainly trying to free themselves of their searing bindings, but the man had done well. They were to have a smoldering end, for no reason or purpose then that of a deranged man and his flames. I dared to close my eyes, to attempt and block out if only the sight of my dear friends' suffering. I could not block out the smell of burning, the sound of their agonized cries. I payed for my weakness, as he had warned me. At the crack of a gunshot my eyes shot open, he shot her foot because of my weakness. I began crying uncontrollably, no longer a mere stream, it became a flood. I could only watch as my ears filled only with shrieking, my nose filled only with the stench and smoke of smouldering flesh. I could only watch their hellish, infernal finale.

Only charcoal husks remained, and, finally freed, I stumbled over to the hanging remnants of my life. My hair slipped over my face, the pink rubber band slipping out of my hair. Strands ghosted over my face, mingling with the ash and smoke, thick and hazy over my vision. I stumbled to their skulls, landing heavily on my knees, hands behind my back, restraining my grief. The band dropped in front of me, a spot of pink in the charred grass, a ring of clarity in the smoke. There were many voices trying to get my attention, but the only one that succeeded was the darkness that beckoned from the edges of my vision and mind. I went willingly, wishing for death, wishing for it all to cease. Please let me forget. Please. Please.

Years later, as time moved forward, I remained stuck in the past. I didn't need help. You know who needed help? *They* did. No one helped *them*. I wasn't going to get help when they had to go through more than me, I only worsened their suffering. I stood in the grass while they were burned alive. I am fine.

The whole world knew. So sad people said, it's awful, a tragedy. They didn't know half of it. They didn't smell it, they didn't hear it, they didn't *see* it. The world was concerned for me. I wasn't. I was more concerned for *them*. "Why?" They asked. I never had an answer, I asked myself the same question. Why couldn't I let go? Why did these memories linger, forever in my mind, a record player stuck on a single note? Dazed, I ran through the motions, refusing everyone's eye, hanging onto the rubber band, the reminder that I failed them. I ruined everything, if only I had been stronger, capable of saving them. I relived the moments once more when I could have, *should* have, stopped him, cut through my bonds, sliced through the ropes restraining them. The rubber band remained on my arm, slightly charred, snapping against my wrist, each pull a reminder, each snap a release. Until the day in which *I* finally snapped.

After all of that, all of the wars fought, one would think, one would hope it to be over. I know, however, the reality. It is not over. The war was only a battle, ended in a draw, both sides leaving the calamity, leaving the suffering knowing they will be back, not because they want to, but because they have to.

Here I stood on the lake's edge, beneath the dying beams of the sun's rays as they sank beneath the horizon. Light bounced along the water's skin, radiant with colors, full of anticipation. I gazed upon the purple and blue, which danced with the yellows and reds of the sunset. I looked out, the lake was a sight that was breathtaking, giving me hope at last. I could

not see through the looking glass into the future, but I knew that I could walk off this bridge back to the rest of the world. I knew that I could let go, I could finally release the rubber band from my grasp. The stupid rubber band, just like the mosquito, caused a itch that I scratched too late. But it wasn't too late. I was here. I might be a broken clock, but I was ticking on my way to the clockmaker's shop, who with steady hands and a gentle heart would put me back together.

I took the rubberband from my pocket. I stared at it, remembering how before, before all this, I thought this little rubber loop meant something, I thought I had to keep it to remind myself what I had done. I was wrong. I lost everything, but I was beginning to understand that it was not my fault. I will remember them forevermore regardless of what I do. I can't ever get them back but I can't ever forget them. I will remember them every time I wake up and everytime I close my eyes and every time it will be acidic, volcanic, and charcoal black. This rubberband, it did so much. But finally, just like all tales this one must come to an end, this rubber band was no longer anything to me.

I pulled back my arm and flung it as far as I could into the vast lake. I stood, listening to the quick, soft splash, imagining it disappearing forever, deep beneath the rippling surface of the water's skin. I am fine. I can be. Now.