

Christina's World

(After the painting of the same name by Andrew Wyeth)

I did not know there was a spectrum of sight beyond that of a haze that looks, at times, like a curtain of blood. Where I come from, there is dust everywhere. Perhaps that is where the weight of the air comes from. Here, the ambiguous connection between sky and earth is gone; the divide between the two is almost stark.

It is startling to come to a place so bright. The air itself is not as heavy, and its clarity is, probably, what allows for the brightness of this place. There is almost too much freedom here. I am almost afraid to move because I might find that I have no way to stop. I could not possibly describe the million ways in which the ubiquitous light reflects off of this strange world.

Autumn is indistinguishable from summer where I come from; there is no mist or bright disparaging colors, for everything is already dead and so nothing is able to die gracefully. The heat of the summers is so powerful and omnipresent that it has nowhere to go when the months, if they existed in that world, declare that autumn has arrived; the heat simply becomes less dense, lighter, but still hangs like a dry curtain over the fields. There are no fences to contain the barrenness. The hazy air casts silver mirages.

Spring does not exist where I used to live. The air, with its cloying heat desperate to escape back into the fields that never froze, hardens directly to summer. Even night never fades completely to black, and sustains a grey dusk even more blinding than darkness. There are no sunsets with the heat constantly rising from the tawny ground. The grass is too sharp, and perhaps it breaks the yolk of the sun and so it bleeds out into the red sky that casts everything in bronze.

The pale sky shines down on the golden field, dying in the cruel breaths of summer. She kicks at the carcass of the rotting cow, now almost all bones with a few tatters of skin and muscle left clinging there in grey sheets and twists. The stench clings to her nostrils and clogs her tongue; she fights back the nauseous lump at the back of her throat and draws back her lips in disgust. There is something grotesquely beautiful about the dead cow. The corpse has, with time and sun and weather, become a work of art in its own morbid right.

A stiff and dry wind swirls wisps of her hair about her face; they stick in the thick sweat at her temples. The breeze disturbs the clusters of flies about the ears and belly of the corpse; the glistening insects swarm up through the thick yellowed air and buzz harshly, leaving shimmering maroon blossoms where they had eaten away at the aged flesh. The girl watches with sickened fascination the maggots squirm and ripple along the outline of the cow, as if to trace the memory of death into the earth. The girl raises her pale eyes to the sun-bleached white sky as a myriad of crows and vultures circle above, calling out rashly and hauntingly, harbingers of something more morose and ghostly to come. The carcass seems even older when the girl looks back at it, yet still as artfully bent and seemingly melted into the ground, becoming the crisped blades of dead grass. This is the first death of summer.

Each day it becomes harder and harder to walk back, for the life is draining from her hour by hour. She is waiting in constant dread for the day when she will no longer be able to walk. Her face is gaunt and ashen. The sun here never burns skin red; it turns it

straight to dust, held together only by the sweat that burns it even more. The sun has the whole land in a fever, and the cow must have died from the delirium.

The girl is not beautiful. Her hair, tied up in a crude and loosening bun, is fine and straight and the color of brown ashes. Her lips are thin and bitter, judging every movement of every ghost she happens to meet in this land of amber summers. There are no winters where she lives, but her eyes are cold as snow-choked skies. From a distance, they seem entirely pale blue, as if the sun has gotten to them, too. But up close they are tinged red at the edges from endless years, if that is the way to measure her life of secluded neglect.

Her body is the old abandoned barn, collapsing and molding at the corners, darkened with the residual damp of scarce rains and haunted with memories too real to remember without pain. Her mind is the ghosts that are never seen but only sensed. These ghosts are much different from winter spirits or the autumn wraiths that hide in trees and watch things suffer below them; these ghosts suffer themselves in the dreadful heat and in the dusty corners of farmhouses, wandering endlessly through the dried-up fields.

All through the desolate months she wastes away inside the grey house. The days are pitiful. Near the floor and in the corners, the heat from those summers still steams and holds the ghosts. When the heat swims thickly across the floor, she knows the ghosts are moving. They watch her eat cans of beans from the next room over. They are barely human souls any more, they are so old. They have forgotten what it was like to have a body, a form, a boundary. That is why they stay indoors and under the meager and fraying furniture. They fear being as free as they could be.

Whatever night there happens to be is far too still for the ghosts; that is when they roam, in the ever-silent and dismal greyness. There is no comforting mist there to hide them, but the ghosts have never been trapped by mist and so know nothing different from the debilitating freedom of the fields.

Chrissy lives alone. She only remembers her name from the embroidered square of fabric, brittle with the inherent age of the place, hanging on the bare wall in her bedroom upstairs. The floorboards, once perhaps shiny and the color of maple syrup fresh from the boiling vat, are dulled and worn in a greying path circling the spindly bed, covered in yellowed sheets once crisp and white (now soft and thin, barely used but still touched just enough to be worn) and leading up to the antique dresser, complete with tilting mirror that has grown dusty and frosted from seasons and seasons of never being gazed into. The ghosts inside of it, by this time, would not have recognized a reflection. Chrissy cannot be in that room anymore, because she cannot walk up the stairs. Perhaps that is for the better; the stairs are as brittle as she is. Chrissy sleeps on a musty couch with only a stiffly frayed afghan to keep her frail and fading body warm.

Chrissy casts one last furtive glance at the corpse of the cow and turns away sullenly, her eyebrows pulled together in tormented pensiveness. She limps her way across the terrible gilded field, passing indifferently through scores of flies and clicking grasshoppers, lifting her stiff and heavy legs for each step despite the difficulty. There is no pain except that of her mind; an oppressive and constricting feeling seems to forever hang over her, and the heaviness of it makes it all the more abhorrent to attempt to walk.

She deliriously and slowly makes her way to the rotting barn; she leans against the moldering and dark walls and tries to breathe in the air full of sun and heat.

There is something savagely erotic about the interior of that old barn: a place from where, when lovers met long ago, the ghosts fled because their lonely pasts made them wail desperately at the sight of what they missed in their wasted lives. The dusty hay seems still to beg for the press of shining bodies, stretching and shuddering in the spasm of pleasure they seek. They used to leave the ghosts stranded in the open until the sweat dried on their peaceful and spent bodies and they swayed breathlessly away. A scrawny cat with a crooked ear and twisted back leg croaks reproachfully, breaking Chrissy from her paralyzing daze, and she kicks it in the ribs, sending it scurrying off.

Chrissy sighs deeply and raises her weak and heavy eyes again to the smoldering field. Black dots like gnats dip and swerve in her vision, and she feels her head grow light and dizzy. The ground pulses beneath her feet. She is used to this sensation; it usually overcomes her after trying to walk for even a short distance in this heat. Her burnt eyes slowly close as she sinks to the ground: she is so tired sometimes.

At night she cannot sleep for the heat. A sudden and obscure thought jolts her; she gasps and clutches at the dried grass at her sides. It is a terrible thought, but that is all she can remember of it, just that it was a glimpse of the kind of true horror that snakes its way through a mind and leaves an impression of uneasiness and restlessness. Soon, the strange tremors of anxiety still prickling her mind, she drifts off into a peculiar kind of sleep; if she woke up, she would not recognize where she was as truth.

It is still the field, but it is distorted in that way that only dreams can distort things. She is walking the way she faintly remembers walking. But for Chrissy, memories

do not exist; they are not of the past, but only visions of the present. The dead cow could be disintegrated now and she would see no strangeness in the swiftness of its decomposition. But in this dream-world the fields are barren. The sun shines red over the grass, and the blades glow as fire. There is no heat in this dream-world; the heat is visible, yes, in the colors and the rippling of the air, but Chrissy, mercifully, cannot feel it.

The oppressiveness in this world comes from fear. Like the heat, it is palpable and real, a part of the air. The subtle undercurrent of terror makes Chrissy's dream-self shudder and want to run, but as in most dreams, she cannot move faster than lethargic and syrupy steps would allow. The terror gradually grows more tangible, and soon Chrissy, with dreadful anticipation, comes upon the source of this eerie dream-haunting.

There is a scarecrow in the middle of the empty field. The sun glares behind it and casts a fiery shadow; the features of the dangling scarecrow are indiscernible. Soon, however, Chrissy sees that it was decaying and flayed. Chrissy looks, but cannot distinguish anything else; part of her mind knows it is herself, in the way dreams know about themselves without explication. Dread seeps around her, enveloping her like flies, the color of ochre, inescapable.

Petrified and unable to wake up though she can feel her body attempting to pull her out, a multitude of crows, perhaps ravens, alight on the atrophied shoulders of the form. They call raucously and beat the sun-choked air with their iridescent wings, and begin ravenously to peck at the head of the thing.

It is then that Chrissy wakes up, and, breathing as heavily as the stifling air would allow, stares fervently at the desolate field, searching for the scarecrow of her dream. It

must be real somewhere, she thinks, because you do not dream of things that you have not seen.

She tries to rise to her feet, but Chrissy can no longer walk. The ghosts in the barn keen and swirl around her head like the flies around the dead cow. Chrissy waves them away and begins to drag herself toward the fields, desperate to find the scarecrow and desperate to escape the ghosts. The heavy air weighs her down and she can barely find the strength in her arms to pull herself along, but she cannot stop until the ghosts are gone.

They follow her, twisting and crying, mourning Chrissy's enslavement by disease and summer heat. The sun beats down almost maliciously, and begins to burn her, gradually evaporating her skin until nothing is left but a skeleton, caught in an obstinate crawl. (Death had curtailed a cry of terror at the sight of a corpse dangling in the middle of a field, crawling in mid-air toward an unknown destination.)