

He was crouching in the flowers when it happened. It was not sudden, nor gradual, but just like a page being turned in a book, something was not there. He stood and turned, curiosity outweighing distant alarm. It did not look how he would expect, in fact, it did not *look* at all. The boy stepped closer to the thing that was not.

“Hello?” the boy said.

“Hello there,” the thing did not reply.

“Who are you?”

“I am not a *who*,” it did not say.

“Then *what* are you?”

The thing did not smile. “I am not.”

“I see,” he said, although he did not.

With that, the boy gathered his basket of flower stems, and began the walk to his house. Glancing back, he watched as the thing did not disappear over the edge of the valley. He had no intention of following.

The thing was not there again the next day.

“Hello again,” it did not say.

The boy didn’t bother with pleasantries. “You left the valley.”

“Did I?” it didn’t reply.

The boy paused.

“I am not. I have no essence of being. Therefore, if I am not, I cannot.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” he said, although it did not. He puzzled, considering his next words carefully. “What is beyond the valley?”

“Would you like to see?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to leave the valley.”

“Why not?” it did not repeat.

The boy opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. The thing continued to stare at him, void of any visible eyes. There was silence for a very long time. “I don’t know,” he said. He looked around at his sanctuary. The moon was low in the sky, nearly tucked below the edge of the hill. He turned to leave, but paused, facing the thing that could not face him back.

“What shall I call you?” he asked.

“I do not have a name,” it did not reply.

“You are more than just a *thing*.”

“Am I?”

“An entity?”

“I am not.”

“A being?”

“*To be* is something I do not; something I *will* not. You may call me *the Being*. As a reminder.”

“A reminder of what?”

“Of what is not.”

The boy nodded, then turned for his house as the moon disappeared over the horizon.

The next day there was no sign of the Being. The boy searched the entire valley. Nothing. When the moon reached the quarter mark of the sky, he looked up at the hills. Perhaps the Being would not be at the top. He began to climb the hill, before he could comprehend his actions.

Surely enough, the Being did not stand at the top of the hill.

"I thought that you didn't want to leave the valley," it did not say.

The boy paused, nearly at the edge of the hill, mere inches from glimpsing the world beyond it.

"Would you like to go?" the Being did not ask.

The boy turned again, taking in his flower beds, the sparkling lake, his quaint little house. He looked up at the dark sky, the moon in her place, the stars lazily looking down at him. Then he looked at the empty void that was not the Being.

"Yes," he whispered.

Within ten steps, the world appeared as the moon over the horizon when the morning came. The boy had never seen so much of the dark sky, never imagined that it went on forever. The constellations that he could see from inside the valley had seemed so many. He had never known there were millions of figures living in the stars out of his view.

The boy stood there for a very long time, mouth agape and eyes wide. The Being did not watch from beside him.

"Shall we?" it did not ask.

The boy tried to turn around, to take one last look at his home. But he could not pry his eyes away from forever. He nodded and stepped out into the gray fields and open sky.

The Being did not lead the way across the plains, and the boy followed. The gray grass that coated the earth sparked under his feet, and the confident flowers stood straighter as they passed. The stones rippled when he stepped near them, like lilies atop a pond. The boy walked until he rounded the rolling hill that separated them from the valley. Beyond it, a lake filled the dip between waves of earth. The inky surface reflected the sky above, imitating the stars and moon in a rippling hallucination of what watched from above. Reeds surrounded the marshy earth around, unmoving in the quiet warm breeze. As they descended the hill, the red earth clung to his shoes. The Being did not stop near the edge of the lake, and the boy stood beside it. They stayed there for a long time.

“It’s a lake,” the boy said.

“It is not,” the Being did not say.

“But it is.” The boy tilted his head, looking back out to the body of water before them. Not water. It was thicker, darker. “Ink?” he asked.

“It could be used as ink if needed.”

The boy stepped closer, the red mud thicker near the edge. He squatted down to the liquid, glancing back to see if the Being would rebuke him or react in any way. It did not. The boy dipped his fingers into the warm, dark surface, cupping it with his hand and lifting it out of the black pool. But it was not black. Perhaps the lighting, or the mass amount that made it appear thus, but the liquid was not ink. It was a deep, dark red. The

boy let it spill from his fingers as he slowly backed away. His foot caught in the mud, and he fell back into the reeds. They made an awful crunch, the sound of a hollow, once living limb cracking beneath his weight. He looked up from the mud at the reeds above him. The thin white bones that reached for the moon were topped, not with seeds, but with pearly-white teeth. The boy slowly rose to his feet, looking down at his blood-soaked hand. He looked up to the Being.

“You fell,” it did not say, the same tone as when it explained something that he did not understand.

The dark surface of the lake still echoed the heavens above, sparkling from the tides created by his disturbance. As the thick liquid dried on his hand, pulling his skin taut as it tried to heal what was not broken, the stars danced in the lake; they laughed and smiled. The boy smiled back.

“Do you like it?” the Being did not ask.

“I do,” the boy said.

“Shall we continue then?”

“We shall.”

The Being did not lead the way around the lake and over the hill. The boy followed. As he walked, the rolling hills steepened. His feet began to ache as he trudged along. The Being was, of course, unaffected. After he rounded the tallest hill, the boy's eyes fell on a field that stretched across the land below him. Flowers filled the plain before him, but not the ones he had seen before that stood courageous and solid. These flowers, even from a distance, emanated fear - vulnerability. The Being did not smile.

The boy followed as the Being did not roam down the hill. Before he could see each individual flower, he could feel them. The red earth pulsed under his feet.

Up close, the drumming was full and loud, and the flowers were not flowers at all. Dark liquid flowed through the thin, delicate veins of purples, blues and reds that were their stems. They fed into the beating blossoms that pulsed the red substance in and out of the ground through winding tubes of various sizes. The boy couldn't tell what was beating – the synchronized hearts that posed as flowers, or the ground which pumped them full of blood. He felt his own heart pulse in time with the living things that breathed around him. They swayed gently with the warm breeze, vulnerable and beautiful. The boy smiled, then looked over to the Being that had not crouched down to the ground. The boy watched as it did not pluck one from the ground, liquid spilling onto the earth. The Being did not lift it to what was not a nose.

“Do you like them?” it did not ask.

“I do,” the boy said.

“Shall we continue?”

“We shall.” As they moved forward the boy pointed to the flower in what was not the Being's hand. “Won't it die?” he asked.

“Don't we all?”

The Being did not make its way through the beating fields as the boy followed, careful not to damage their vulnerable forms. The pulse dimmed as they traveled further from the field, yet the boy still felt the echo within his chest.

The first hill they rounded revealed a pile of dark, ashy substance that made the boy hesitant to approach. Up close, the once shining metal was burned and rusted,

breaking away at what once were sharp, geometric shapes. Hollow tubes clung to the rods that were attached to the dead, flaking carcass. The boy touched it, and it crumbled beneath his finger. He turned to the Being.

“It’s dead.”

“It was never alive,” the being did not reply. The boy didn’t question it. These things were not normal. They were not right. He continued walking.

“What are they?”

“They are not anything anymore.”

“What *were* they then?”

“Does that matter now?”

“I suppose not,” he said, “but I *would* like to know.”

The Being did not blink at him, as though it were thinking. “They once mimicked the living, with veins of metals and oils for blood. They were once helpful. They were once good. Until they were not.”

“Why did they become... not good?” the boy asked.

“Because that is the exact purpose they were created for.”

The number of broken bodies grew with every step he took, until he had no choice but to walk on top of them. They held his weight without crumbling, as though they had been dead so long that they would never move again. The boy remained by the side of the Being as it did not walk confidently across the graveyard. The smell of ash grew. He looked up to the sky, unsure when it had changed from its usual navy blue to a dark, colourless gray. When he looked back down to the horizon his eyes caught on a spot of colour in the distance.

It was a bright, unnatural red, that made the hair of his neck stand on end. As he came closer, the boy slowed his steps, looking up to the Being for reassurance. It did not look back, void of all sympathy and expression.

It was a tall box. The red was flaking to reveal rusty gray beneath it, littered with ash and debris. The sides were clear and partially shattered, one hanging ajar. The Being did not approach it, and the boy followed close behind. Upon the wall dangled a strange device, a handle stabbed full of holes on either rounded end. It hung limply from a fraying string of black curls. He stared at it for a long time, trying to decipher what it could be, what it could do. As he opened his mouth to ask, a shrill noise made him jump, a terrible, echoing ringing that forced a shiver through his veins.

“So that’s what it does.”

“That is not all,” it did not reply.

“What else?”

“Press the biggest button,” it did not say.

“What will it do?”

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Everything.”

The boy approached the screeching thing, stepping carefully into the red box. He placed his hand around the handle of holes and looked back to the Being.

“Listen,” was all it did not say.

The boy did, the cold instrument now ringing into his ear like a scratched bell echoing through a tin can. He reached out with his hand and pressed down on the big



button laced with worn symbols. The ringing stopped immediately, followed by a long silence. The boy looked up at the Being, opening his mouth to speak. He froze as a sound echoed in his ear.

*“Hello?”*

Everything stopped. The boy’s eyes widened, his hand frozen on the device against his ear. His stomach dropped, voice catching in his throat. He wanted to scream, but the pain burrowed its way back into his heart, the sound of its racing beats echoing while his rapid breaths quickened. Against his ear the voice came again, this time sending pain through him as his eyes remained glued to the Being.

*“Hello?”*

“Do you like it?” the Being did not ask.

*The boy did not like it.*

The cursed device fell from his hand as he stumbled out of the box, falling to his knees. The Being did not watch, unmoving as the boy crawled away. He fumbled into standing, his hands and legs now covered in black ash and rust. He staggered up the mountain of dead, knees weak and legs shaking as the putrid stench of muddy ash filled his lungs. Slowing atop the hill that overlooked the graveyard, he looked back to the

Being. It did not stand at the bottom of the hill. It did not look back at him. It did not. It was not. It never had.

So the boy ran.

He ran as fast as he could, fighting against burning lungs and straining legs. He ran over the hill and through the field of metal corpses and ash. He ran through the beating field of flowers, the blood of those he trampled soaking the cuffs of his trousers. He ran around the lake of starry blood, the mud clinging to his shoes as it had before. He ran until he reached the valley, and then he stopped.

He stood on the hill that overlooked the valley, *his* valley. The breeze whistled through his hair as the moon shone from above. He looked down at the blood and ash that stained his legs, feet and hands. He knew without a doubt that their stains would never leave him. They would cling to him every day of his existence, plaguing him with memories and swirling thoughts of what lurked outside. Forever a curse; a reminder. He looked out over his garden, his field, his home. And the boy walked back into the valley.

*He did not want to leave the valley.*