

THE QUARRY

The Zoo

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“He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.”

- Dr Johnson

“Beneath the surface of every one of these fallen men lies the beast inside them; it is as if in each of them is the point of intersection where some animal species meets humanity.”

- Victor Hugo

As the Man enters the Zoo, he remembers when he was led through the same dark halls as a kid, in a small pack of twenty of his peers, all of them terrified and intrigued by what was on display. As he walks, he sees his memories appear like ghosts in the glass, walking alongside him. He tries to ignore the cold steel of chains clamped around his wrists and ankles, jangling

and echoing against the cracked stonework as they walk together. Behind him, he can hear his shadows follow his footsteps, all of them behind the thin form of the Tour Guide.

‘On this level, we keep all of our Rats. Desperate little things, aren’t they?’ The Tour Guide laughed, a sick little chuckle that suggested that he might not be the best person to talk to children. Or perhaps the best, given the circumstances. ‘They rend and take in selfishness, eager to escape the flames of their own destruction, and mindless to the suffering that they cause.’ As the pack passed the glass crate cages, they could hear the skitter-scattering of their tiny feet and the sound of their gnawing teeth tearing into their meal. The unfortunate creature had been brought in like a bewildered cow to an abattoir, blind to what lay behind the iron door it had chosen.

The Tour Guide is older now, but the only sign of this is his hair, which has faded from grey to pure white. Other than that, his face still retains the same cruel and thin lines. Above them, the Man can still hear the Cat singing its song on the flesh of its poor prey; broken birds with melted wings of aspiration, flying high and thinking that they could live forever. He knows now, as he suspects they do as well, that this is impossible; the Administration is forever. They had destroyed it; they had thought they had set everyone free. But the people were liars to their own hearts; they didn’t wish for the freedom that he had brought. Like a hydric machine, others had filled the void that they had created and rebuilt the cages to which they had become accustomed; it was what they were trained to do. It was the only thing they knew. He had lost everything, blood had stained his hands and now he was being punished for it.

Together, the Man, his shadows, and his memories descend the stairs to the next level, the next series of clear cages. One of these, he thinks, could soon be his, and he dreaded the thought.

The Tour Guide stopped abruptly and turned on his heel with outstretched arms, looming above the children. His face stretched into a wide smile, his lips pulling at the waxen skin of his cheeks, but his eyes seemed fixed in place, a squint of disgust. Unmoved by the rest of his face, their colour was the light grey of the hidden sky at dawn. He looked to the largest of the children in the small crowd and held his gaze, before continuing, still with a forced smile. ‘Here, we hold our Pigs. They eat whatever they are given, to excess, again with no mind to the others they hurt. Where the Rats debase themselves through their desperate self-preservation, the Pigs have nothing to blame but their gluttony.’

Through the window-walls, they could see the herd of pigs fighting amongst themselves for the “food” that had been dragged in by masked figures and dropped it with a heavy thud. As quickly as they had entered, they were gone, slamming the iron door shut behind them. The poor creature lay on the floor, completely still, except for its eyes, which darted around in a frantic panic. Its eye made contact with the Man’s, still a child in his own mind, and held it. He could not hear any sound through the reflection, but he knew that the creature was trapped by its own muscles, not responding to its brain, and it was screaming. Its eyes darted more frantically, trying for some way to escape their prison of flesh, itself caged by the glass. Its muted screams rattle inside the Man’s head, like a mistuned radio picking up a thunderstorm. It was suffering. That much he knew, both then and now. The eye kept his gaze, even as the body it belonged to shook and tore apart in red and pink splashes of chaos, until finally one of the pigs took the eye as dessert. Not even bones remained on the bloody floor when the frenzy died down.

Another level down, the Tour Guide continued with his sermon, a speech that he had crafted and refined to his liking over the years.

‘And here, we keep our Bull. Beautiful, isn’t it?’ he asks, pausing to hear the resounding wonder of the young crowd. As the words bounce around his mind again, the Man could see the large bull in front of him once more. It was still fiercely ornate and intricately decorated. As they approached, it growled, and steam seemed to curl from its mouth, slowly filling the room with a fine mist of sickly-sweet incense. As a child, he had thought that the creature looked almost too perfect, like a giant living creature that had been encased in bronze, not pieced and welded together in a deliberate design. It was only later that he learned how it had been made, and the fate of its creator, a poor artist who had spoken out against the Administration too many times. They had been told that he had died due to an accident in testing, but the Man knew that this was simply another of many lies the Administration told on a daily basis. Like the creator of this beautiful and terrible thing, he had grown tired of his role as a cog in the machine, and had only hoped to make a difference. He had hoped that destroying the figurehead would bring down the cages, and the borders with them. Instead, he had lost him for nothing. Nothing had changed, except for the feeling of failure that lingers inside his gut, and that, in a twisted way, this was what he deserved. He wonders what lie will be told of his own fate, as well as his compatriots. ‘It doesn’t really matter’, he thinks. ‘It’s not my job anymore.’

Another level down, the Tour Guide led them through halls that shined blue and green, flowing lightning cracks of white light flashing like waves against the walls. Each cell was filled with water, filled with more creatures. Behind one wall, there remained splatters of blood splashed from a meal, slowly fading into the water with the ebb and flow of the creatures moving inside. The Tour Guide sighed, ‘Now, unfortunately, we’ve missed feeding time, but—’ the speech was drowned out by half of the children groaning in unison. Meanwhile, the Man turned to look at another cell. There was nothing but clear water inside. The only sound was the muted shout of the Tour Guide in the background. Suddenly, a trapdoor opened in the ceiling, and a large black plastic bag was thrown in, splashing into the water and sinking fast. Looking back, he notes how similar the bag looked to the ones he had seen two of his compatriots now call their final resting place. For a moment in his memory, the Man could see another masked face through the open hole in the ceiling, its black eyes staring deep into his own before slamming the trapdoor closed. He turned his attention back to the bag, slowly sinking to the bottom of the cell. It moved strangely as it sank, like a living tar that was failing to form limbs, a writhing mass of worms that wanted to be free in the water.

It softly struck the bottom of the tank, and whatever was inside continued to writhe and shake, its movements slowed by the water. The thing inside seemed to pay no attention to its sudden stop, still only focused on panicking and struggling, like an escape artist realising their key was missing. The bag finally tore open and another poor creature broke free from its pocket of air, and with it came several serpents wrapped around its torso and limbs, strangling and biting at the pale and blue flesh. He recognizes the face now, and regrets that he did nothing, that he could do nothing, when he had first been brought here. The creature was struggling, unable to breathe, while the serpents entwined around him, flourishing on the struggle of their own blood. He was now exactly what they said he was: a Snake, one that had spoken poison to the masses, a cancerous tumour that had to be excised as an example to the rest of them. This was proof that the system worked.

Tears run down the face of the Man, snapping back from his memories. He had cut off the head of the serpent that had wrapped itself around the world, but in its place a stronger monstrosity had risen, one that had grown even more determined to stamp out any dissidents, any dissonance from their message of conformity in fear.

‘Are you paying attention, boy?’ The Tour Guide had suddenly appeared next to the Man’s face. He held his face between his skeletal fingers, curling under the cheeks and framing his mouth, forcing it into a smile showing teeth. This close, he could smell an unholy stench, a steam of rotting eggs and mould emanating from the thin mouth and hooked nose.

‘Yes’, he lied, terrified. The Tour Guide stared at him for a long moment, the grey eyes filled with disgust digging into his own, searching for something, anything, any excuse to make an example in front of the crowd. Disappointed, he inhaled deeply, as though he was drawing in and feeding on the fear of the small children around him. With this, he stretched his thin body back to his normal tallness, and sighed before continuing. As the Tour Guide turned away, the Man could feel his classmates watching him, catching one eye watching him with a furious intent, peeking behind the girl’s blonde hair before she turned her attention back to the Tour Guide, eagerly devouring every word that escaped his thin lips.

‘Well, in any case, it seems you’ve started watching without me.’ He feigned a sadness in his face, his lips stretching down before curving into his twisted smile, but his eyes remained still.

Finally, both the Man and his memories are led to the final cage. Beyond the open grey stone and steel archway, thirteen doors lay around the chamber, spread out evenly like the markings of a clock. Each door had a symbol engraved into it, carved as intricately as the details of the hairs of the Bronze Bull. Each symbol was one of the animals they had seen on their journey through the Zoo. He saw the mental images in the clear light of his mind, and each were stained a deep red.

Here the ghosts of children fade away, and the Man is finally alone in the chamber, alone in his mind, no more memories of this place to draw upon to distract from his reality. Around him wait the Tour Guide and the Magistrate, along with his two nameless shadows, each wearing black and white and ravenous masks. They had gently accompanied him on his journey, one on each side behind him, always nudging him forward to keep pace whenever he walked a little too slow, with a reluctance that no one would blame him for.

His speech and his part to play over, the Tour Guide slinks away, like a cat leaving a midnight catch at its owner’s feet. The Magistrate nodded to him, slightly shaking the dirty white wig that she wore with pride, exposing strands of greying blonde hair. She fixes her wig with a slight touch, making sure it fit tight against her skull like a parasitic crown. Her gold rimmed

spectacles balance on her crooked nose, and the thick lenses grant her grey eyes an alien quality, bulbous and slightly too large for her face. A grey gown hides her form, and he imagines that the warts that adorn her face have spread across her body, a hideous representation of her welcoming invitation of the Administration's word into her own spirit. She was beautiful once, he thinks, but years within the system have withered her skin and hunched her form. She is apparently the same age as him, and he wonders now if she was really among the crowd of children that had been led through these halls so many years ago. He knew it to be true, but truth is easily fabricated these days. She clears her throat, a sickening sound of acrid air passed through rusting pipes. She begins her own prepared speech, the one she had spoken word for word for years; the same years that the Man had spent creating lies in the name of the Administration's truth. Her prey was now at the centre of her web, and her own predatory dance begins.

'No mind can ever be wiped completely clean,' she says with a vulture's smirk, as though she was looking at a future meal with an eager tongue, not a man with a sorry soul. 'There will always remain traces of past lives, past memories. We have realised, with this, that the animal inside will always remain. Thus, it has been decided to erase your human mind and let you beast choose its rightful place.'

The shadows take their places and buckle the man into the faux leather chair. They strap the cap of electrodes and wires to his shaved head. As one of the masked figures behind him sticks a needle into his neck and urges its venom into his system, he wonders which door his body will chance opening when he is stripped of his humanity. The tears have dried up and left him, and he prepares his mind for a final sleep. As thought and memory begin to drift away, he wonders which punishment – which death – the lizard brain of his walking corpse will soon choose for itself.