

What the Garden Hides

by Caily L.

Their footsteps were hard against the small, curved bridge, the rubber of their cane thumped against solid wood that had stood strong for centuries, the noise echoing out across the pond. While they walked the ten paces it took to cross the bridge, they took in the water around them. Cherry and Oak wood stood out against the murky grey-blue, stormy like the eyes of another. Scattered randomly in a way only nature can make look purposeful were water lilies. Pinks, purples, and whites against rich and earthy greens that faded into less saturated, more sated versions of themselves. They reveled in the attractive smell of the water that surrounded them, the scent of the world and fragrance of the wood and flowers, the taste of the wetness in their mouth, rotting leaves and frog spawn forever embedding their presence on their taste buds.

Then, all too soon, the ten paces were up, and they were once again surrounded by the wooded trail: startling them from their self-induced stupor. Following the trail, feet crunching against sticks and mulch, cane sinking into the wet earth, they took the time to enjoy the world around them, not sure how much longer they'd have to breathe the fresh air surrounding them. They chuckled as one of the low hanging branches of a tree tapped their face in a gentle caress, the gardens giving all the love it could back to them. Gently, so as not to ruin the balance of it all, they pushed the branch aside with a raise of their hand and walked on.

And then, not quite five paces later, the short woods stopped, showing an unobstructed view of a circle laid from yellow stone. There were ancient benches surrounding the circle, small tufts of weeds growing from between the bricks cracks only serving to heighten the splendor of the carefully placed stone. But their favorite part of the whole ensemble was the delicately carved statue standing in the middle of the circle.

She was not of the most conventionally appealing figure, not particularly endowed in any given area, but the detail and intricacy She was carved in, the amount of love and care put into every chip and scrape made to form Her, the imperfectness of Her, it was what made Her beautiful.

Her form was carved from an off-white stone, made dirtier with age and weathered from many storms. She was tilted, body curved elegantly to observe whoever was coming to view Her. Her gaze, however, was pointed toward the heavens, never allowing the viewer to be viewed in turn. Dark vines curled up Her torso, accenting Her already natural loveliness, wringing Her delicate curls in a leafy headdress. Her arms had been broken with age, spirited off to some unknown location.

She was scenic, picturesque, everything they had ever loved and wanted.

She was the paragon of perfection.

And if She could breathe again, they would fall in love with Her mind and Her form all over again.

They turned, pressing their back to Her statue and tilted their head up to view the heavens as well. They breathed in the smell of the gardens for a final time, enjoyed the sun shining on their up turned face, and listened for the tell-tale sound of water lapping against the ponds shore as the wind blew harshly against the water's surface, tossing their hair with its rush to be somewhere. They could imagine it, Her beloved lilies dancing with the rush of wind, skimming the water's surface in light and gentle kisses. They opened their mouth, a harsh, rusty, old voice greeting the air and Her, saying hello to the flora and fauna hiding where they wished to not be seen, and they sung a tuneless melody.

“When the Water Lilies bloom and cry for spring,

And when they wither and die for the fall,
They'll tell you about the change in the world,
And warn you to prepare for winter.

Their petals will sing to you about death,
And how he will come for all of us.

They'll tell you that the beauty you admire,
Over the bridge and within the garden's walls,
Won't last forever.

While the river grass dries and the water freezes,
Life will lurk under the surface.

And while all you may see is the death of the world around you,
The earth is cleansing herself from the pain you put her through.”

The last word rolled off their tongue lightly, reverently, hauntingly, filling the air with their sorrow. They blinked the tears from their eyes and looked back up, looking at Her for one last time. They set their cane down on the pedestal holding their love. Slowly and silently, as not to disturb the peace in the world, they slid their wrinkled hands up the cold, solid stone statue as they sank to their knees, joints creaking and protesting the movement. Leaning their whole weight against Her, their hands coming to a stop cradled around Her dainty ankles. They were shaking with the effort to keep them there, old age had made them brittle, an artist and sculptures most trusted tools rendered immobile by the inevitable downfall of their own body.

They let their final words of worship for Her leave their throat and die on their lips.

Then, they closed their eyes and tipped their head back, resting it on the base of her pedestal, cold stone hard against their neck and head. One day they might join Her in her

permanent imperfect magnificence, but for now, they were content to leave the world to its own devices, to let it follow its predisposed way of entropy, just as their body had. And with one last loving gaze at Her – their world, their life, their love, who they had taken years to carve to perfectly replicate Her unnatural grandeur – they slipped into sleep, happy to let the Fates take control of what would happen next. They would be happy, ecstatic even, to let the soft silver butterflies of death’s song carry their heart into the distance for good, for this world was for naught without Her.