

*~ Song of Ophelia ~*

A Short Story by A. E. Corder

*“For more than a thousand years sad Ophelia  
Has passed, a white phantom, down the long black river.  
For more than a thousand years her sweet madness  
Has murmured its ballad to the evening breeze.”*

— Arthur Rimbaud

*“We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others, that in the end, we become disguised to ourselves.”*

—François de La Rochefoucauld

I went down to the river because there were stones on my chest. I wanted to find a way to lift them, to find some chance at rest. In my mind’s dark recesses I feared the only way to escape—*truly* escape—would require a surrender, somewhere secure—perhaps the bottom of the river, not just the edge. But I was not seeking to escape all life, only those facets piling stones, building the precipitous tower on my chest.

*Unless*, whispered a thought in my head, *unless you are the cause of such stones. How then can you escape yourself?*

Shut up, you.

I was determined to escape something, and for now my station at court would do. Any reprieve was welcome, and the riverbank, with its rustling trees and rushing water, seldom failed to drown out the ringing in my head. To calm the anxious throbbing in my heart. I was feeling too much again. I needed to get away—if just for a while.

Dashing out as inconspicuously as I could, I pulled my jacket off its hook. No one was likely to miss me. I never told anyone when I’d left, and even if they did

notice, I think by now they were all quite used to my disappearing for random hours of a day. Gray clouds slumbered across the horizon, musing of rain. I pulled my hood further over my face, then hurried cloaked and silent through oblivious city streets. Past a tucked-away alley, a narrow brick pass sloped down into one of the abandoned roads. It curved away from the city, extending between a dark forest and a long knoll crowned with shrubbery.

A glance to ensure no travelers lingered nearby or had me in their sights, I skipped up the knoll, where at closer inspection a gap appeared in the wall of foliage. I was always afraid of losing it to the growing tangles, but still it remained, the faithful doorway to my escape. Squeezing between thistles and affectionately clinging thorns, I emerged out the other side in weeds and the shadows of trees.

A sharp tug pulled on my chest. What if I missed something while I was gone? What would they think if they saw me like this? What if someone needed me for...something? What if—

From the crest of their hill, what towers I'd left behind challenged the broad sky in defiance. The gray in all its sweeping could not darken their polished steel, failed even to cloud their glass, every window another blank screen. Like mirrors they glittered back, spindling upward in cold spires. Ever watching, even now.

Resentful of the image, I turned toward the river. A line of stones slithered along a steep and shaded incline in the distance. Held in hesitation for a moment, I left my path aside. The stones trailed past a branch of the nearby river before scattering at the base of two adjacent trees—a natural portal of wood and leaves, which I immediately deemed necessary to pass through. What if they were the doorway to some unknown enchanted place? I wondered with silly glee to myself. Proving my thoughts were no secret to them, the trees ushered me into a preserved fairy world as though waiting for me all along.

Here sunlight pierced the sky and filtered through a canopy of leaves. Here distant melodies of unseen birds set music to the air, while diamond dewdrops sparkled on spiders' webs. Exotic oceans of flowers smiled in waves of soft color. And the heart of the scene: a river brook which split the earth in two. The water was a dark velvet color, too dark to see the bottom. Sunlight skipped across its surface in silver, lily pads and blossoms floating like toy boats. Willows wept over the banks, draping their frail fingers into the water, swayed about by the wind. Finding no signs of any other creature, I dropped my jacket at the base of a willow and nestled myself on the bank, draping my legs over a ledge of earth extended above the brook's bottomless black.

A breath of relief escaped my lungs; I was never aware of how much tension I'd been holding in until it was released.

*But it's never released. Not really.*

A sharp tremor in my pocket screamed against my leg. I pulled out my cell phone, dreaming (not for the first time) of watching it *plunk!* into the water and sink with the weight of its accompanying enchantments. Instead I flicked a switch on its sleepless screen and shoved it back away.

I should have been breathing in the wonder of such a refuge, but at best it could only contrast with my troubled internalizing. Running my hands through the grass, I fantasized over what would become of my conflicts. An aching heart? An emptiness? Revelations I couldn't ignore; strained and altered friendships. It had begun to feel like everything was turning to water and slipping through my fingers. Like I was being left to start over again while everyone else moved ahead. Back to square one, was it? I leaned over the ledge, watching the water in its passage. The relentless passage of time, it was. Even here, the endless cycle—unbroken.

The wind turned cold, groaning softly through the willows. Their leaves looked more like limbs now. Heavy, reaching down into the water for help. The flowers grew in sorrow, mementos of something lost. The earth hid secrets of its own, willing enough to provide glimpses for my wandering imagination. Skulls peeped up through the soil, flowers blooming in their sockets, ivy crunching through their teeth. Ancient corpses twisted their bones among the tree roots. Serpents coiled in the vines. This place, no matter how sacred, still cradled that inseparable bond of life and death.

My attention drifted to the water again, the tunnel of shimmer silver and velvet green. Such a quiet deep, stretching into a place without time, without turmoil. To become part of a place like this, it wouldn't be so bad? Would it? To find peace in the dark, instead of this nothing, floating in between. I waved my foot over the glassy surface. I wondered how cool it felt beneath. And just how far it really fell. Just how deep...

Dissolving my reverie, strange folds of white unfurled in the darkness below. Ribbons drifted up from the rippling depths, thin and translucent. Nearing the surface, they bloomed into a dress, one mixed with pale flowers and river weeds. And there—wrapped in its center—a woman, tangles of hair obscuring her face. There was a *body* in the river brook, beautiful and grotesque.

Before breaking the surface, the woman's hair parted. Having stumbled away from the water's edge, I leaned forward in anticipation. Her face was pale but preserved, invoking visions of beauty from a once young and radiant maiden. But as I observed, each new ripple peeled back that face into its present state of decay: soft and pale to spectral white, bruised and blue to its final skeletal shape. Breaching

the water, her face returned to its former memory, and though lifeless, her body now floated on the surface.

I bent on my hands and knees to study her. To wonder with sadness what her story had been and why—to my horror—breath seemed to escape her pale blue lips. Her eyelids rolled open, revealing a marble gray color beneath. Then in a rush of wind that disturbed the mossy willows, I heard her scratchy, solemn whisper bubble up into my head.

*Don't follow*, she said.

*Don't follow me down into the river bed.*

Though her lips formed the words I heard, no sound came out of her mouth—only water, which gushed down her face and back into the brook. More startled than scared—for the figure seemed strangely physical—I struggled over how to respond. In the end, I merely settled on the bank again, wondering in dumb confusion why she had appeared, this phantasmagoric form of some fallen angel, ribbon wings of white turning green with time.

*Don't follow*, she'd said.

The current swept along its course, but her body held fixed. I noticed tendrils of her dress twining back into the watery shadows. She must have been pinned to the riverbed somehow. Moored to its depths.

The maiden spoke again: *Cold, so cold. It won't give you the rest you seek.*

How could she have known what I wanted?

"Please, spirit," I found my voice replying. "What is it you wish?"

Combing through my hair and the curtains of the willows, I feared the wind the only receiver of my words. But the eyes of the maiden melted into a clearer imitation of the blue they might once have been.

*I have no wishes*, she answered. *I lost everything to the river. But you... Your heart cries pulled me from the depths where I am bound to remain...forever and for always.*

My eyes travelled from her eyes to the flowers floating about her head and clasped between her breasts. I followed the folds of her train and the stones along the bank. And I began to understand. Perhaps she too had been a lonely wanderer once, looking for a place to rest. And when her weights became too heavy and she let herself fall...they must have pulled her under so quickly. The one thing she wanted becoming the one thing she would never get. Unable to move on, even in death.

She sighed in a sad and lovely way. *Mustn't drink their poison.*

Her voice was soft and detached, rising and breaking in the patterns of the wind.

*All is futility in the end.*

Her words began to settle, to blanket the dark corners of my mind. I glanced over my shoulder, searching the spaces between the trees. I could picture the towers rising behind it all, rising against the sky. Every window amounting to a pair of roaming eyes—I could see them, reflected in a crown, and the court over which it ruled. The same court of which I was a part, though my purpose in it was lost to me.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked her. “...What *can* I do?”

For something dead, she gave me a surprisingly knowing look. A crest in the current nudged her corpse closer to the bank. I pulled my knees up to my chest.

*Everyone has two faces in this world. One we construct for life's grand parades. The other lies beneath. A face only emerging when we feel safe. In the moonlight. In the shadows. It is by this face we are truest, though the other is far easier to wear. Therein lies the danger. The more we wear it, the harder it becomes to take off again.*

“Best not to wear it at all then? I’m afraid that chance is past.”

*You should do...what I should have done. Leave it all behind. Live. Far from the immaterial hunger and all the empty extravagance. You won't be like I was, will you? Reduced to another pawn in a game?*

“...Just give it up?” I whispered. Her ideas stirred me with conviction as though confirming an impossible dream. The thought had crossed my mind before, but only as a wisp, insubstantial. It did give me a giddy sort of whirl, but I didn’t think I was capable of imagining it through, let alone acting upon it.

Who was I without a place? Maybe I didn’t establish the rules at court, but I helped keep the charade. I too danced that degrading masquerade, waltzing in unacknowledged desperation. And oh the horror, if cracks in the mask started to run—unable to disguise them with a brush of glitter paint—I dreaded to imagine it: how coolly they’d pretend not to notice, and the retribution that would follow—the self-inflicted, silent and mental pain. Another unbroken cycle...unless I could break it? Could I accept her offer—to leave the board behind, leave the mask buried where it lay?

The brook lowered its babble to a murmur, the spirit unfolding on its surface like a dying flower in reverse. Did she really have the answers, with as much time as she’d had to reflect on her mistakes? Was there ever anything she could have done to change them, or was she always doomed to this watery grave?

With a heavy and almost unconscious air, the maiden stretched out her arm, unfolding her cold white hand. She rolled on the water to the edge of the riverbed. Watching the mournful waves reflected in the depths of her eyes, I stretched out on the earth beside her, feeling less alone now than I had in a long time. If only I could find this in the place I left behind, perhaps then everything would be different.

*I know what you would seek, the maiden whispered, but it won't make you happy.*

I could feel my heart quickening, the internal pull; restless soul warring within a living shell.

*I would have done anything for what I thought was love, anything to be seen and wanted. I let them shape me; I let them have everything...my mind, my body, my name. I sacrificed it all. Once I knew what I'd done, in a futile effort to win my freedom back, I did the only thing I felt it would still allow. The only choice I thought I could make anymore...*

Her voice swelled with regret. I pulled my gaze away, focused it above, patches of white between the black. A pool of emotions churned somewhere behind my chest, but instinctively I willed it still, balling my hands into fists. The world in here was quiet. The world out there was distant.

*Don't give yourself over to the river.*

I shut my eyes, noticing how sweet the flowers smelled. I ran my hands through the grass, twining blades around my fingers. How soft.

*"I won't,"* I told her.

Her tone was airy, child-like. *Do you promise?*

I released my hands of the earth and looked at her again. Side by side we lay, she, on a bed of water—me, on a bed of earth. Her white dress folded beneath ripples of black—my dark clothes nestled between snow-colored flowers. I could feel the bond twisting between us, twisting like the ivy and the bones. Patterns of time and mirrors in its cycle.

The willows swayed their gentle tears. The flowers laid their drooping heads along my shoulders. I closed my eyes to the solemn green while the wind caressed my cheek. Here in this separate place, this other world, I could almost believe I was safe. Lulled to sleep by the winds and waves, somewhere in my descent, the maiden began to sing. The melody carried a mournful tone but was a comfort still, sweeping like the petals on my skin. The words blended into visions—strange and lucid sorrows that swept like currents through the eyes of my suspended mind. Visions of doves in flight and poison spilling out of skulls. Tears watering graves like rain.

Flowers blossoming backwards. Bright, unblinking eyes. The breaking of glass. The sinking of stones.

*And will he not come again?*

*And will he not come again?*

*Laden with sweet flowers*

*Floating on the grave they go*

*Stay your wishes, stay them all*

*Take care you, not to follow*

The maiden's voice carried on though she sank into the green and black. Swallowed again by the deep, just as I was swallowed by sleep, stirred only by the song.

*No, do not follow me*

*...wilted spirit without sleep*

Cold, marble-white hands, with dirt-stained nails and dripping wet, grabbed my arm and sank into my flesh.

I woke with a violent jolt. The world around me was dark, twisting in wisps of sleep demons. It was hard to breathe.

*You're fine. Everything's fine, see? You don't know where you are. That's all.*

Trees. Surrounded by ivy and trees. Silver lights pinpricked the distance. I forced the pressure in my chest back down, keeping steady breaths while my heart hardened against a familiar weight.

A brook trickled quietly beside me, the water glinting black. Willows held still in the windless night, gray observing ghosts. A pale light haloed on the ground. My phone. The screen revealed several pensive messages—and an urgent summons to court. Oh god. I'd been away all day? I'd missed so much. Tension locked its jaws



around my heart. I grabbed my jacket and turned to go, snapping vines that had wrapped around my limbs.

*Can't afford to wander off so long*, I told myself through clenched teeth, trampling flowers in the dark. My screen continued to blink, unanswered. Through the forest, over the road. The moon made itself visible, casting back swift tendrils of cloud. I wrapped the jacket around my shoulders, retreating into its hood. Here from this view, the towers above were illuminated a deep, midnight shade of blue. Lights in the windows flicked their sparkling tongues, beckoning my return. I'd almost crossed over when I stopped at the threshold, disturbed. Something vital ticked at my memory. The harder I reached for it, the further it retreated, deep into mental obscurity. My panic flared in turn. I couldn't go back to court like this. Everyone would see—or sense. They'd ask questions. How could I explain what I didn't understand?

I might have spiraled out of control there on the city steps if I hadn't felt it in my jacket, pressed against my chest. A rush of relief poured into me, and suddenly all felt right again. I withdrew the item, humming some foreign and misplaced melody to myself.

*No, no, he is dead:*

*He never will come again*

Wrapping a black ribbon around the back of my head, I found my reflection in the glass of a dark and empty window. Once I'd confirmed the glittering mask was tied securely over my face, I faded like a shadow into the cold tangle of city streets. Black and silver-lit pools siphoned the tension out of my system. Restoring my balance, my stony reassurance, the familiar rhythm of steel and screens put my trembling thoughts at ease.

My cell phone gave a waspish zizz again. This time I answered it.

**where r u???** the message read.

**on my way back**

**where have you been?**

**out.**

**again?**

**i needed some air**

**how soon can you get here? i rlly need to see u.**

**almost there.**

are you ok? what happened??

i don't know.

u don't know

...

?

i don't remember

That night I dreamed of poison—twisting and crawling through the reaches of blue pale veins. I wandered a vacant gallery, searching for the source. There—poised in a column of hazy light from its pedestal of stone—a human statue. Limbs, frozen marble. I could see the poison within—melting its bones and pooling in its brain, a black and acid pool—and also the poison without, the sculpted face sinking into a form of vague distinction. The progression was slow, psychological, and in the end, left only a singular, overpowering emotion—a panicked sort of dread. Its origin was lost to me, offering only a cruel sort of awareness instead: what I knew to be true but was powerless to change. The vision relinquished me to its hazy aftertaste once the poison had finished its masterpiece. I looked up to find everything of original value erased, leaving only the habitable and inconsequential in its place.