

The Visitation

The old man walked out of the darkened house and down the street. It had been an impossibly long day, and he knew tomorrow would be just as impossibly long as well, just like every other day. He passed the city library, and he passed the city park, remembering the last time he had heard the laughter of children swaying from the swings. People walked by him without looking where they were going. Cars drove by without a care for their speed. Even as he passed too many people to count on his hands or remember in his mind, not a soul said hello.

It had been so long since he started that he couldn't even remember what his life was like before, or if he had even had a life. He could remember fish flopping onto land, men making fire from stone, birds convincing the invariability of gravity to remiss their lofty flights. Sat there, he did, as Rome burned to cinder. Watched, he did, as Atlantis sank. Cried, he did, as the war to end all wars proved only a precursor. Shunned and hated, he was, every step of the journey.

There was not a single creature, alive or extinct, that he did not know by name. He had spoken with the greatest of beasts, the smallest of insects, and the oddest of man. Never happy, never sad. The stretching pull of a smile, the unconscious force of a laugh, the feel of water on the tongue. If ever he had felt them, their memories were long lost.

Not everyone could see him, even fewer wanted to. He was a thing of myth, despite an undeniable truth. Witnessing it all, he knew the limitless corruption of Mankind, a shadow always outshined by Mankind's own limitless hope. Their sins, their work, their dreams and crimes, their good deeds and bad intentions—he knew it all. If it were up to him to any degree, the world would be better. Erase the sin. Erase the hate. The starvation and judgment throughout the world, the ceaseless violence and pointless cruelty.

Why? He couldn't tell. With all the creatures he's pet, and all the people he's met, never has he conversed. Even without the accompaniment of dreaming thoughts, he knew the world deserved better. To digress from the tunnel of purpose set upon him was not in his nature. To contemplate free will was futile. Just as the virgin stork knows the path it must migrate, and as the blind sunflower knows to follow the sun, so too does he innately know what he will do every tomorrow.

Walking all day, walking all through the night, without distraction or pause. Knowing no hunger, pain, or pleasure, only what there was to do—yet even the primal wind seeks more. Not a single crime of humanity had gone by without his witnessing. He had seen how brothers were treated better than sisters, how the inanity of color designated power, how those of gluttonous lust for pride and power claimed sacred alliance with invisible benefactors to control those starving for a breath of living mediocrity.

Trillions of lives seen. When first he witnessed life mimicking his own image, he thought perhaps he learned the feeling of hope. If its warmth ever did broach whatever lies within, its coals were long cold. Life's most powerful creation was also the most hateful.

Were they his origin, or his end?

The old man keeps walking. Not knowing the path, merely following. Doing what needs to be done. No patience. No forgiveness. Only doing what he must.

He comes to the house he knows is right, and walks up its cold brick steps. Inside sits a family. Some old, some young, only fate knows whose time has come. Rarely is it fair. As they sleep he walks up the stairs. Past the fireplace that has released its insatiable prisoner to feet. The smoke reaches out in looming shadows. The fire is climbing the walls like ivy. Not a soul has awoken.

The siren grows louder as help comes racing, but not everything can be stopped. It's not up to the rescuers, nor the family, nor him.

As the walls are blackened, and the air is filled, the old man enters their rooms to welcome those who awaken lost.

When the sirens are no longer distantly pleading but screaming in distress outside, the house is crashing under the engorging fire. No one sees the old man walking down the street. His long black cloak catches the air, and his face shimmers in the air. He wishes only one thing, that a day will come when man reaches peace, where he does not hate nor hurt, and he will no longer be needed in this world.