The Butterfly’s Powdered Wings

*“Give it time, change lasts forever.”*

. . .

*Float on.*

I am the ghost with no eyes.

But I can see the days withering away.

i. cocoon

The fog hiding the forms of the oaks, thick and disguised as a shapeless sky as if floating around me in any direction, was my path forward. Decay was heavy in the air today. Festering, stinging my nostrils and lungs, though I paid no mind to it. It was familiar at this point on the journey as it followed close behind in the dirt, grass, and powdered snow. Slowly dragged along by the ankles, knuckles tracing designs in the white and green, as if the art formed there would ever be seen as beautiful. Those lines, thin and tracing the forest, would spoil and rot away much like their creator. A silent memory decomposing from the brain of the world. But from their place on the ground, the memory spoke out.

“It feels like we’ve been this way before, Arima. The ground has the same chill to it from a few days ago.”

I didn’t turn my head to answer the words, each barefoot step forward harsh against the white.

“The days are growing bitter. Seems more and more of the forest is starting to shiver from the sinking cold. Besides, the dirt feels as frozen as ever, and we haven’t seen any of our tracks again. Can’t possibly be going in circles.”

A huff sent out a cloud of visible vapor, though I listened for a response.

“Could we at least stop for a bit, then? I think I’m about to split in half. And we may have left a couple of my fingers behind a few miles back.”

The wings over my eyes blinked. But as a sign of obligation, I dropped the ankles wrapped in a frigid grip to the ground, and turned away from the path ahead.

There, lying in an oddly natural state on the earth, was the body of a girl. Arms stretched out above her head and tangled with a mess of leaves, dead grass and hair, her skin was gray and molded. Sections of flesh had appeared to either have been cut away or fallen off in a vast period of decomposition and abuse, while the shedding skin exposed bone and colorless organs underneath. Her teeth were visible through one cheek, and the white dress that could hardly cover the slim body was ripped viciously at multiple areas. Countless green and blue bruises, petrified ribs pushed up and out of place, claw and nail marks running along her length, she appeared as the canvas for the world’s wrath. But my own gaze stayed on those hollowed sockets, empty to the low sky from where her eyes had been carved out. My wings blinked again before moving the body upright against the trunk of a nearby oak.

“How do my hands look?” she asked with another breath of vapor as I adjusted her; her head hanging off to the side towards her shoulder, limp.

Hands laid gently into her lap, shivering slightly, I looked down to count for her. The right hand, lying on top of the other, held its correct amount: half of a thumb, a decently chewed on middle finger (enough to get down to the bone), and a nail-less pinkie. While the left was only missing its thumb and pointer. I recounted just to be sure, but the number came back the same each time. Six. Triple checked. Six. I nodded.

“They’re all there still. Must be imagining things, Shibito. You sure we didn’t leave some of your brain behind instead?”

Shibito chuckled at the comment, forming a half smile aside from the rotting on her face. The frost fixed on her tendons cracked as they stretched along her jaw. “You know, it gets hard to tell sometimes. My fingers get pretty numb in this weather, and it's been about a week since you last ate. I might not have lost any fingers, but I can feel myself about to fall apart at any moment.”

Though I tried to mimic the expression she gave off, I couldn’t help but become concerned as she spoke. My gaze traveled to her side, and I moved one of the rips in the loosely fitting fabric aside to inspect the skin below. And there, clear amongst the gray and blue, the tissue was ripping away along her back, sprawled out and splitting from the spine and muscles. Though it wasn’t too deep, I sighed at the sight. That was enough for Shibito to speak up again.

“That bad?”

I moved the fabric back in place, as if hiding what I saw diminished the situation.

“It’s starting to progress,” she said, her visible teeth clicking hard in a chatter. “Either we need to get there faster, or start consuming more. We won’t make it at this pace. As much as I don’t like being left alone, it’s only necessary for you to go and hunt. Plus, it does feel somewhat nice to not have the feeling of constant decomposition roiling through me whenever you do manage to eat.”

Following her words with a nod, where the light layer of snow that had gathered on my neck shifted and fell off with the heavy movement, having chilled and tightened the skin there, I couldn’t help but agree with the body. With another sigh, I looked up at the low sky, hardly able to see the designs amongst the trees’ lowest branches with how envious the clouds had become of the solid ground. The sight caused the eyes of my wings to narrow against the shiver that danced at their edges. “I know, I know. You’re right. It was bound to get more difficult the further we got. The weather isn’t helping anything either. Can only walk so far in the snow until something gets left behind.”

The body shook with a chuckle, though the minor motion was enough for the bark against her back to peel at the soft, decaying stretches of skin and muscle attempting to rest there. Pushing at the back of her lungs, with the scratching of her exposed vertebrae craving at the oak’s own harder skin, Shibito laughed out a thick cloud that added to the fog.

“And I’d rather it be a bit of brain or a finger or two than my entire upper torso. With how focused you tend to get, you’ll be halfway there by the time you notice how much lighter my legs got.”

It was instinct to imitate her enthusiasm.

“I’m sure it would only be a couple miles until I actually noticed. You’re a lot heavier than you would imagine, considering how much of you we’ve lost along the way already.”

We laughed simultaneously, the snow's plummet tranquil between us. Echoes in expression, mirrors in form. Matching each breath and inhale while a breeze rolled through the grass and branches to remind us of the cold. Together, we trembled. But the optimism in my voice tried to fight against the motion.

“Besides, I like to think we’re more than halfway,” I said.

Shibito’s lips lowered; jaw tightening with a serious, empty gaze. Her brow and cheekbones flexed to mimic the feeling of a blink, but all that those hollow sockets caught were a few more snowflakes at home against the frozen skin.

“What makes you think that?” she asked in a low tone, much like that sky I’m sure she wished she could look at.

From the silence, I hardly knew how to answer. Nor did I want to turn around and look on towards that stretch of forest we had yet to reach. The thousands upon thousands of trees we hadn’t seen or passed, all as metacarpals clawing at the edge of a path that could possibly never have an end. All the miles we had traveled, and the countless more to be taken. I didn’t know where we were going, but, somehow, the peace we were searching for was closer than we thought. I could sense it above the decay that had sunken, became petrified in the air. The distance, however, made me think about the things we had already forgotten and left behind in the snow.

Lifting my right hand, I was careful to caress Shibito’s cheek with a tender touch. It was nearly ice, and the minimal pressure I brought caused the membrane to crack and split in a spider-web design. But my own cheeks stretched back, aside from how tight the biting breeze made them, to form a smile, even though it appeared small and she couldn’t see it. It was the only sense of warmth between the two of us, and I tried to capture that ember -- mild, flickering -- for as long as I could. My voice brought the winter back.

“Believe me. We’re closer than you think.”

Before Shibito had a chance to answer, my hand dropped with a nod, as if my body was attempting to find the truth in those words as well. I was slow to stand up, allowing a few moments for my already stiff joints to straighten out from the chill that had settled into the bones. Again, the white that was slowly descending took hold of my being. The eyes of my wings wandered, blinking, until I decided on a path to take.

“I’ll try to be back within a day,” was all that could escape my shaking lips. Though I didn’t know how far we were from anyone, I couldn’t make any promises. I never could.

Shibito’s smile returned. Exhale, a steady haze from indigo lips.

“What color are your eyes today?” she asked.

The snow crunched below with each step as the forest consumed me, bitter against my exposed toes. Straight back into the wild, that fog and frost, to see where the winter would follow. Leaving her behind was always the hardest part, but I couldn’t look back. That was the necessity at this point of the journey. The single word that escaped me was melancholy, and caused those low clouds to shake in their positions. I could nearly touch them from here, it seemed. They sent a breath, a blow, and I gave an answer.

“Blue.”

ii. metamorphosis

*“What are you hiding behind the wings of those butterflies?”*

That was the question that always reverberated in my memories. The question those enduring thoughts and whispers would ask me as I searched for the next one. I was the change of the seasons. The shifting colors and shapes, sprouting wings and losing them again and again. They burned away, fragile during the descent, in the snow or at the surface as it melted to meadows of drowning and new decay. All simply repeating, more so than just insanity, but the way I carried on. Give it time, nothing lasts forever. Perhaps at one point I’ll fade away as well. But I’ve heard of a place. To get there, means I could finally find peace. There’s no going home from here. No return to the things left behind.

The forest was denser here, further on to the east; the clouds thick, hanging closer to the ground and more gray with the lingering fog. Those depthless shapes hummed, a sound I mimicked with a twirl and dance, light on my feet against the white. The gaze from my wings drifted from those designs, down to the trail in front of my toes, and I tried to listen to all that low sky was singing to me through the snowfall. It was difficult to hear those quiet notes. Subtle, pale, coming in with a quiver. My lips vibrated to sing along.

There was a flutter at my fingertips. Faint, struggling against the cold, but strong enough to grab my attention, stop me along the path that had been created, and have me lift my hand up to greet it. The curious creature, there probably to steal the little heat left in my fingers, fluttered its wings again as my hand leveled out.

A butterfly, red and purely vibrant, stood atop of the pale skin. Its wings now folded up, sprinkled with a dusting of old snow, though their sketches were still visible. Black outlines carefully painted against the red found there, trailing and drawn between each fold as rivers that branched up to the main designs. Four eyes, sable and bleeding drips of irises that stared back at me. Completely innocent, though I could feel the menace that the glare held.

The wings over my eyes blinked. The newfound companion mimicked the action, slow to remove the powder along its designs. Those several pairs of eyes, set and staring, held our connection as the forest hummed around us. I enjoyed the silence for a moment before taking a step and continuing forward. But with a single flap, the insect rose up, having warmed itself enough (or taking all that had been there), and flew back into the forest. I watched from a growing distance, it's crimson stark through the environment, and silently followed along where it had gone. And as I walked on, an image emerged within the shelter of the trees that spread out into a clearing.

Guided along by the creature, the outline of a cottage came closer into view. It seemed like a cozy place, resting warm and comfortable amongst the snow and chilled bark as a smoke cloud bellowed from a chimney to add to the smog of the day. Even through the separation of the place, I could nearly feel the heat that glowed past the windows from the inside. The thought of the possible comfort only drew me in closer, a cold haze escaping my lips, until I was at the last set of oaks that outlined the edge of the garden that was reposed as a front yard. And as I approached, a sound, chopping and continuous, came from the backside of the cabin I couldn’t see. Curiosity took over my being as I followed the outline of the property, keeping some distance between the structure and noise before what I heard came into view. My footsteps were silent along the surface of the snow, the frosted lengths of the hardly lively brambles and thorns, until I made it around to see what was hiding behind the cottage.

It was a boy. At least, that’s what I could tell from the distance and the tall stature that stood above a tree stump with an ax in their hands. Most of his body was covered to fight off the weather, huffs of vapor coming out to dim his face with each swing that would split a piece of wood set up on the stump in half. The wings over my eyes were wide, and they blinked in wonder at the phenomenon as I took some cautious steps forward. With careful aiming of my toes, I was deliberate to step on a few twigs to allow their snap to echo into the forest.

The boy looked up, eyes wide like mine as they found my gaze. I couldn’t help but chuckle as he stumbled backward into the pile of firewood that had been created, almost tripping but it seemed he managed to catch himself in his reaction before falling over. White watching, my stare and body stayed motionless, allowing the boy to get settled again before he spoke up from his spot.

“Ummm, hello?”

The boy waited for an answer, his voice thick with concern.

I didn’t give him one.

“What are you doing out here? Are you ok?”

My gaze narrowed, though hardly enough to be noticed from the range. The innocence radiating from his lips pulled at my heart slightly, but it didn’t stop me from moving forward some and coming out of the cover of the brushes and trees that hid most of my figure. The boy took a step back, though after a few moments studying the ghost creeping closer, he allowed himself to settle. From the pattern of clouds puffing from his mouth, I could tell he was starting to relax, not yet figuring out my true nature. A tiny smile curled up the stiff skin along my jaw as he spoke again.

“Are you lost?” were the words that reached me.

My wings blinked again, dancing on my toes before answering.

“I don’t think so? Though I’m not so sure where I’ve been going, I believe I’m right where I need to be.”

The vague response made the boy’s eyes squint, but he didn’t become any more cautious as I moved closer. Instead, he stuck the ax within the stump, and moved away from the wood that strove to trip him before.

“How did you find this place?” he asked.

Still a pirouette on the surface of the snow, light with my feet, I looked away from the boy and around at the surrounding, hardly visible bottoms of the stretching outlines of branches. I was sure my friend was hiding around there somewhere, flashing its crimson wings in the shallows of the gloom.

“I was following the butterflies.”

Even more curious now, the boy attempted to follow my gaze, examining each tree after me in hopes of seeing what I was referring to.

“One of the spirits of the forest… I didn’t know they interacted with humans, much less lived all the way out here.”

My stare returned to catch his. Gingerly, each step taken to close the distance mirrored how gentle I made my voice.

“Oh, the spirits live everywhere, in everything, though they don’t like to make themselves known too often. Keeping to themselves, wandering along, no matter where. Behind every blade of grass, snowflake, under every rock and root from here to every single edge of the forest. Withering away with the days as they’re all looking for the same thing.”

“And what’s that? What are they looking for?”

I took a moment before answering him, staring into those exposed brown eyes right in front of me now. The skin along his cheeks looked so smooth, showing an expression of genuine wonder and worry. I had to stop myself from reaching out to feel something alive like that again.

A single word fell from the cloud that froze my lips for a second.

“Peace.”

Blinking, and with his body looming over mine, the boy slowly raised a hand towards the wings resting on my face. They, and I, didn’t move, not even when he was an inch away from touching the demure designs. It made me wonder, in those quiet moments, where that silent snowfall could hardly fit between our two bodies, what patterns were so captivating within the blue of my face. The ones those eyes, so wide and captured, reflected in the brown I could almost decipher in the distance. But no matter how hard I concentrated, to look past the color and life within that gaze to see if anything outside those hues had become trapped, lost there, I couldn't. I watched the boy’s dried lips move while he asked that same, ever-enduring question.

“What are you hiding behind the wings of that butterfly?”

Though I dreaded the action, instinct took over. I didn’t need to answer him, as I’m sure he received it with the movement of the wings that stood in front of the true nature of who I was. Besides, it all didn’t matter in the end. In a single moment, when his horrified expression took over, I could already taste blood and the leaking loss of life from it as it warmed my body from every trail that traced along it. It didn’t take any effort to crush his throat between my teeth, his wide eyes quick to unfocus on the world and fade away from the color that had resided in them. And as I took another life along my journey, I felt that gnawing sense wash over me once again. The same feeling mimicking what hid behind the wings that would shed a tear if they could.

Nothing.

A small, soft cloud escaped the lips of the boy as a last breath, swift to fade away as well. Aside from the body that was hanging in my mouth, my body shook, jaw clenched hard in distress; gaze stiff, harrowing. I sensed a dampness upon my wings, a warm red against that harsh blue. Stained again, dripping from my vision, and it took a moment of silence before I fell to my knees and began to feed.

Ripping at my prey, I could feel strength and moments to continue on with returning, and I felt that Shibito was feeling the same effect up against the oak I had left her. Rejuvenating and being built back together, I took some time to flex my fingers with their familiar energy comeback against the numbness of the day. This was the necessity of my path forward. And even though these were the memories I tried to live without, carrying on towards finally resting outweighed the guilt pushing against my brain. That real, true cold and winter, always following so close behind amongst the withering days and footsteps in an attempt to never be left in the snow. There wasn’t going back to the way things used to be. To the things I couldn’t remember, or wished to forget. This was my change.

Exhale, the breath was visible as a whisper.

“*Peace…*”

I am the ghost with no eyes.

And I float with the butterflies.