

Morning Offering

The man in black strikes a humorless profile against a sky of slate, and he casts no shadow upon the dying grass.

He is unshaven and doesn't wear it well. The lower half of his face looks greasy and sloppy. His hands are serpentine, fingers intertwining in a constant bouquet of motion. They are hands of apprehension, and it is an apprehension that he wears on his aging face. It is a face that does not stand out in a crowd.

He does not *want* to stand out in a crowd.

The man in black adjusts his collar, a blinding rectangle of white against shades of ebony. Rumpling the perfection over and over again for no reason more than to recreate it. His eyes glint darkly, and the mottled light sparsely flashes in the bullets of sweat that dribble down his waxy forehead, down the bridge of his nose, between his eyes. These eyes, beady eyes, dart back-and-forth. They don't know where to look, and, since they cannot look at nothing at all, are reluctantly content with their restive nature.

It is not a warm — nor even a mild — morning; what can be seen of the sun, flashing intermittently, low above the horizon, between threatening clouds, is not a warm sun. A frigid circle unhappily whiling away the moments before it can return to its blanketed isolation below the sea. The man sweats despite this. He mops his brow with his sleeve. Droplets trickle down his wrist; he does not notice. If he does notice, he does not care.

Far, *far* below, the sounds of the tides roar, waves crashing upon ashen rock. The edge is close, dangerously so, and the man's scuffed dress shoes — “work shoes,” his daughter had

called them — quivering mere inches away from the brink. The water is black and reflects only the deeds of the man who looks into it. Above the sounds of the raging seascape, barely audible beneath rasping gusts of wind, the man in black speaks. His words bear the sins of the countless men who have spoken them before.

Dear Lord,

It is a short prayer but one that he knows well. He used to say it every morning... not as much anymore. The creeping guilt begins to whisper in his ear, and he waves his hand, keeping the dark thoughts at bay. He clutches the silver cross that adorns his neck. Its corners have been worn down. What was once a bright metallic is now a dull murmur.

I do not know what will happen to me today.

This dullness permeates the man. It is riddled into his psyche, and he reeks of what could have been. There is no time now to dwell on such a distant past, however— not when the recent one holds such gravity. The past is a leech that hangs off of the man, draining whatever remains of his youth drop-by-drop. A vampiric succubus driving out the faintest traces of morality that may have remained within this raven clad husk that now stands before the cliffs.

He tells himself many things. Justifications; rationalizations; clarifications; ruminations. They bob and weave amongst the trenches of his conscience, ghosts of logical clarity that, when seen briefly, and through the warped lens of hindsight, appear worthy of consideration at the very

least. The vague, velvety apparitions and figments of the mind's clockwork dance around the truth like shadowy puppets.

But when the puppets control the puppeteer, who holds the strings?

I only know that nothing will happen that was not foreseen by You,

Withdrawn from an inside pocket, close to the chest, his right hand holds a photograph. Stained with blotches of crimson, the figures that live within the crinkled paper gaze out with a lifeless melancholy. Soulless are the smiles that adorn pallid masks of skin and hair. The hand closes around the photograph, carefully folding along well-worn lines.

As the picture returns to the pocket, the wind picks up to a particularly forceful gale, one that rocks the alders but cannot seem to throw the man from his perch far above the mirthless Charybdis that waits hundreds of feet below. For a fleeting moment, he nearly thinks it will. And for one moment more he almost wishes it will.

But his footing holds.

His sweat is drying now. What began as apprehension has crawled its way to acceptance — an empty acceptance. Devoid of true feeling, it writhes in the spotlight of an eyeless gaze, pleadingly attempting a metamorphosis into something more. Heavy clothes stick to the man's ample frame, wrinkling and creasing across the many crevices that map the anarchist topography of his body. He pays no mind to the discomfort, he lets it nag him and creep across the surface of his mind. His thoughts are on the heavy weight in his jacket pocket. It drags him towards the moist earth,

and directed to my greater good from all eternity.

and he can almost feel the reptilian hands that grope and grasp at his ankles.

His heartbeat is barely palpable, a smattering of variated spikes and valleys that pound in his ears as if a knock on a door as muffled by a cotton sleeve. A cold weight against his chest, a leering reminder of the gravity of what he holds within the folds of his robes. The black metal has a frigidity that is even tangible through the layers of black cloth that feebly attempts to keep it at bay, and it is a bleak reminder of the ice that tickles the back of the man's neck.

The inching guilt slides slime-coated fingers up and down his neck and presses its bloated lips against his cheek, yet he cannot cry. To cry would be admitting the guilt is there, and to admit of the guilt would be admitting to the past. It was a past that he would give anything to forget and he knew then that it would not be so easily ignored. The battered cross still decorates his neck, and he wishes above all else that it could take him somewhere else. He thought back—why was he here, anyways? He remembers little of his arrival, even less of the events leading up to it, and wishes to look no further into the well.

But further he goes, and catches jarring glimpses of a murky yet somehow immediate past that he remembers as if it were years ago, not merely hours. It is hard to fathom the concept of time when yours has run out at last.

The glimpses follow him as he stumbles through the catacombs of memory. He hears a flash, sees a bang... there's so much noise, why is there so much noise... a hand reaches for his, a man's hand, he pushes it away, instead reaching for what lies in his pocket... so much noise...

he squeezes on the slim metal strip, no not *the* cross, but a different cross, something colder something pinched by demons... *why is there so much noise...* chaos, pure raging chaos... *STOP THE NOISE...* the hand is no longer a man's but a child's, now a woman's, it is pleading, he sees its cries with a crippling sense of urgency... *he can see the noise...* two crosses, one around his neck and one in his pocket... *the noise the noise pleasepleasepleasePLEASEpleaseaeSTOP*

He is crying. The guilt has bubbled to the surface and is overflowing through the dark eyes of the man who bears the demon's cross. It sags in his robes and for a moment he fears it will sink right through. The tears are uncontrollable after only this brief time, he finally lets them go. Boiling drops crisscross his pale cheeks and splash upon the cracked and browning grass that lies crumpled underfoot. They melt into the dry stalks and disappear and yet he can almost see the dark, damp spots that mark the unholy water that spawned of his dark deeds, and he can almost see it staring back...

The man is a cripple, but only as of mere hours ago. His leg is a mangled slop of gristle and bone that limply slinks out of the bottom of his long coat, a carcass that drags itself along the ground as a wounded animal would. His teeth are gritted fiercely, his lips are dry and cracking, and he holds a dull wooden crutch under his arm; it helps some. Not with the pain, but with the manageability. He does not know why he ignores the pain, but that does not change the fact that he still does. Maybe he only ignores it for

I adore Your holy and unfathomable plans,

the deeper pain that gnaws on the forefront of his thought and emotion, a pain that is merely a symptom of basic human transgression.

He has ignored the plan. The plan, set, in stone, etched into the basic principle of the task, weighing slowly on his anti-prescience that lets him see with the 20/20 backwards foresight into the gravity of the path that he now staggers further and further away from. The plan was before his leg was shattered, before he felt that cold demon's cross clutched tenderly with exquisite force that bled power into his sweaty palm and gave his rage a vice and released his vice of a conscience. He knows now, he knows so much... he's lost his way, he can feel it. Something is not right, and he *knows* something is not right, and he's known longer than he lets himself remember.

Things were not supposed to go this way— that much is instinct alone. The air is heavy and imbalanced around his head, like a sack of sand that is unsteadily leaking. Warm wet blood oozes down his thigh and saturates his senses, and he reaches again into his pocket. He pulls out the picture and stares at it for an infinitely brief moment before raising it to his lips. He gently presses them against it, and his dusty, cold skin scrapes against the warm, wet scrap of paper that has been squeezed against his palpitating breast and caressed by the spray of the distant waves.

He does not fold the picture, does not return it to his pocket. He holds it in his left hand and grasps the silver cross with his right. The crutch falls and the man loses his footing, staggering toward the edge. His foot slips! He slides on the smooth, heartless grass and is dragged near to the beckoning blackness of the waves. Whatever resilience still remains within his crumpled spirit reaches out, he desperately sticks out a hand to catch himself. Fingers make

purchase with dark, cracked earth and squeeze, *squeeze* for the love of God, and by some slight miracle he does not fall.

He pulls himself forward, back away from the abyss. He frantically searches with his eyes, sees the picture dangling on the rim of the precipice, curses his leg, curses his hands,

and submit to them with all my heart for love of You,

watches the final memory of the family he forsook be swept by a particularly vengeful spat of breeze into oblivion. He is all at once lame and heavy, frail and bitter. He lies upon prickly blades that dig into his hands, wrists, and neck and spitefully cling to his clothing as he tries to push himself up. His hand once more creeps to the adornment strung in silver around his neck, and, with a newfound strength, tears it from his neck.

The chain snaps with a nearly inaudible *plink* that echoes in his ears with the impertinence of the act he has just committed before the eyes of the One he has sworn his life to, the One who has taken away all that made this life worth living, the... one.... who at some point decided who is worth salvation? The one, the one, the lord, the father, the one who took his heart, took his faith, took his soul, cast them upon the rocks that danced so close yet so distantly far only minutes before. The one who groped for his ankle and dragged him toward the sea below.

The greatest human fear is abandonment by

the Pope, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary

the ones that we trust and love, who we trust to guide us, the feeling that we get when we realize that they have led us off the path that they told us we should, no, we *must* walk upon, the line that we toed, desperate. The desperation of the knowledge that our ignorance has not been ignored. The bitter realization that we have lost the guiding force that makes us who we think we are, and who we think we are meant to be.

A silver chain with a dull, worn strip of metal dangling from the end cascades down into a sea of blue-black; the man who wore the chain for decades thinks of it no more. He pulls himself, weary, to his feet. His hand, shaking as it is yanked to and fro by the crushing winds, delves deep into the pocket of his black robes and retrieves the demon's cross that rests within this flap of cloth. It firmly grasps this that has taken so much away from the one who asked for so precious little, and sends it following closely behind the silver chain that has not yet even hit the water.

Splash, the first. *Splash*, the second.

The man in black stands at the edge of the cliff and looks out. He thinks of a life spent reaching for a hand that wasn't there. The only comfort lies hundreds of miles below. Chapped lips flutter open, finishing the prayer that started an eternity ago.

Amen.

The man in black looks down.

He fingers the white collar that snakes around his neck, and relinquishes this final scrap of holy competence into the eager winds.

He looks up and watches this last remnant drift up and up and up toward heaven.

Silence— the wind itself holds its breath as scuffed work shoes shuffle into line.

Splash.