

Wild Things

By Aubrey Nyberg

He was a man, that much is certain. It is whether or not he was human that remains the most unanswerable of questions. Even at first glance this was unclear. His long and unkempt mane, with small sticks and burrs stuck in the tangled mess, was neither hair nor was it fur, but some mystifying combination that made him seem almost beast like. As if at night he became the monster that had hid inside your closet as a child, somehow he had escaped, and I had found him sitting three stools down from me at a bar in my town.

He sat there, second beer in, and stared into his bottle like there were words hidden in the bronze liquid. I had always been a gullible person and was beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol, so I looked into my own bottle, only to be disappointed by the lack of secret messages hidden in my drink. I drank the last mouthful and set the bottle down with a clink. The man was still there, just sitting, and although he looked as if he had the means to kill a man twice my size, my curiosity over the lonely beast far outweighed any fears I had that he was alone for a reason. I shuffled over to him and sat at the bar stool on his right. He turned his head just slightly to meet my eyes and I instinctively jerked my head back. His eyes were the piercing kind, grey with a ring of dark blue around them, unsympathetic and almost hostile. "Can I help you?" He asked, stroking his mud spotted beard. His voice resonated in my ears; it was slow and deep, causing the air around his mouth to vibrate like a loud swarm of bees. I coughed and

said, "I noticed you were alone. I wondered if perhaps I might join you." He flicked his eyes up and down, looking me over, before saying, "If you must, though it's not my first choice." "If you want me to move it's no trouble!" I exclaimed, pushing myself lightly off the stool. "It would be exactly that. You're already here, you might as well stay." He took another swig of beer and then wiped his lips with the back of his hands. I sat back down and ordered another beer, light this time. I did not want to get drunk in front of this man. I had this unshakable feeling that I had something to prove to him, that he had one opinion of me and it was my job to change it.

Throughout the next few hours, I learned about this strange and interesting man. He was a nomad, never feeling as if society as it is now fit him, he felt more at home in the tall grasses of the plains and the sands of the desert. I myself have always needed a bed to sleep in, air-conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter, and I tried to explain to this man my side of things. Of the wonders of cement roads, the convenience of cars and trains and airplanes, but after droning on for a few minutes I realized that was the only point I had; convenience. He was unimpressed, "Just from your description, which was lacking in anything truly persuasive, I know that I could not endure the mundane and sad lack of propriety of the life that you are forced to lead. You are a slave to society; shackled to every ideal and practice that you as a model citizen are expected to uphold. I have broken from my chains, I am a free man. And I don't think I could ever settle down now that I have tasted that freedom. You will never know beauty until you live in the wild. See things as an animal might see them, everything is heightened; the colors, the smells, the soft and gentleness of nature as well as the danger in it. Danger out there is real, its wolves and stampedes, its starvation and thirst,

nothing like the dangers of your world. But I don't fear dying the death of a wild man. As I am today I would think even death is sweeter in my world than in yours." He said this all quickly and without hesitation, and I saw a light jump and dance in his eyes as he thought of the world as he knew it to be. I felt an itch at the back of my head, a silent wanting, a deep and passionate desire to see the world through those steel grey eyes. "You speak beautifully." I said with the whimsy and awe of a child. "No. I am speaking of beauty, there's a difference."

Every time I would try and ask a more personal question, about why he chose to live as he does, how he grew up, even his name, he would give a very brief and often irrelevant answer and then bring the discussion back to the wilderness. His mind was empty, it seemed, other than his vast knowledge and memory of life in his big little world. When I asked if he grew lonely out in the deserts and plains with no company other than the animals that lived there he seemed offended. "Animals are perfectly fine company. You can't be lonely if you are never alone. I will admit to occasionally missing intellectual conversations such as this, but they always seem to find me when I stop into towns for more provisions. So no, I am not lonely." I apologized for my ignorance and the conversation went on. We shared stories of our respective lives, of my common and unexciting life in the small desert town I had decided somewhere down the line to call home, and of his nomadic explorations across the Midwest. With every breath he took I became more and more entranced by him. The dull roar in his voice, the way his eyes went from hard and dull to bright and sharp when he spoke of his seemingly never-ending memories of time better spent. I could have listened to him speak forever.

At some point the stars disappeared and suddenly it was morning. We left the bar and the light of the sun was just peaking over the red rocks of Monument Valley. As soon as it kissed his cheeks I knew he would be leaving me soon. I was right, "Alright well this was fun, but I need to be moving on now." My stomach dropped, I didn't expect him to want to stay and I wouldn't have idolized him as much as I do if he had, but I didn't feel ready. I wanted to soak up his words more, wanted to live vicariously through this man, who seemed to have lived every dream I'd ever had. I asked him if I could walk with him a bit, just until we got to the rocks. He replied with a very hesitant yes and we were off. Somewhere along the way he took off his sandals and put them in his shoulder bag saying that he loved the feel of the soft red sand against his feet. I kept my shoes on, knowing all too well how hot this sand gets and that he must have been extremely calloused in order to handle it. He didn't really talk much while we walked. "Nature demands your attention. It requires quite in order to do its job. If you're going to walk with me you have to respect this and keep quite. Listen to the quiet...isn't it lovely?" He said all this in a hushed whisper, his voice slow and steady. I felt my cheeks get warm with blush and coughed to clear my throat. I opened my mouth to say ok but he put a single finger to his lips to silence me. My mouth stayed open, stuck in speaking position but no sounds escaped. I nodded in understanding and we continued on towards the rocks. Every once in a while he would point something that would have otherwise gone unnoticed by me. A lizard peeking its head out from under a large rock, dead cactuses which because of my textbook view on the world around me, I was unable to discern the bone dry dead cactus from the slightly less dry cactus that was still flourishing with life, and King birds perched on top of trees, shuffling back and forth

on a branch staring longingly at a small rodent on the desert sand below . But for the majority of the time there was no sound between us, almost as if he was holding in secrets. I was alone with only my thoughts and the sand filled winds and this man, who seemed to just blend into the backdrop almost as if he were part of the desert itself.

We reached the rocks and the sun was now hovering over them, shining down on us. He looked at me and his lips curved upward in what I think was a smile. "Well, this is where we part. That's how the story goes right?" I laugh, "Yes I do believe it is." I don't know what to say to this man, this wild thing, I can't properly express his effect on me so I opt to say nothing. He stares at me as if he is just now realizing I'm real, "I did not expect you to happen." "Neither did I." I said, my voice shaky and soft, suddenly hyper aware of how isolated we were. I reached out to shake his hand, our final goodbye, but he simply shook his head, looked me in the eyes and said, "Not like that."