

UNTO THEE,
THE FATHER STRIKES
FEAR UNIMAGINABLE,
AND THE HEAVENS ABOVE
SCREAM
AT HIS ONSLAUGHT,
ONE AS SUCH
THE DEVIL HIMSELF
HAD NOT KNOWN.

I

1 **S**tumbling out of the imposing church doors, I caught my balance as I tripped over my own feet in a rush to escape. Flashes of what I had witnessed shot before my eyes; I had to run.

2 They were wrong. They were all wrong. How could it be me they had been talking about? Grass scraped the soles of my feet as I ran faster than my heart could catch up to. Glaring back at me horribly, a glorified light reflected from the roof of the place I once knew as home. A haven.

3 The sky darkened with an oncoming storm, dragging down the heads of many the sparse flora and fauna. I held mine high, adamant that none of this was my doing. My thoughts whirling, mismatched, reminding me more and more how out of place I had always been.

4 I wrapped my arms tightly around me, unwilling to slow my pace by too much, as I entered the forest. Behind me, the distant building was swallowed whole by

the shadowy trees, save for the monumental cross, thin, and spindly yet standing strong.

5 **D**efiant.

6 I used to imagine myself like that cross. I remember when the altar boy would walk carefully down the aisle as he held the cross high, I remember thinking that could be me, I remember feeling the empowerment, the safety of such a thing.

7 Never did I think I would end up as the one on it.

8 Clouds swarmed closer above me, thunder rumbling in the distance. Rushing past leaves of a sycamore tree nearby, the wind froze my fingertips, and my blood began to run cold. I picked up my feet, running as I had before, deeper into the trees.

9 They had shrieked “Devil” at me. “Liar,” “Demon,” “Sinner,” - the words foul off their lips, spat into my face, leaving me bound, useless. The Priest had disagreed, and in that moment, I had looked up to him for guidance, shining hope in my eyes at his display of faith.

10 But then he said I was worse. No punishment one would siege upon the Devil could be suitably laid upon me. No, I was for the cross, left for God himself.

11 My pace quickened, though I already knew my fate. Nowhere to hide, and try as I might, to outrun them would fail. Branches whipped and stabbed me, leaving marks bloody across my bare skin. The ground felt like nails pricking my feet, propelling me on further. A burden heavy on my shoulders caused me to hunch over exhausted and breaths rapid. There was no reason to continue to fight and yet here I was, denying my fate to my final breath.

II

1 That was when I saw them. No, It. A shape through the trees on my left that made me stop running. It was a hooded figure haloed by faint light and emerging gently into my line of sight.

2 The ground under my feet was less rough here and I could see that the path ahead of the strange figure opened out. Eventually I noticed it was

carrying something close to its chest, a clay water jug, and in that moment, it turned and walked to the direction of the light.

3 I followed. I had nothing left.

4 The clamouring trees seemed to thin out and the sky was lighter. I was sure I knew where we were heading, from a memory or a story once told to me. I went with a certainty of someone who had taken the path already.

5 The figure had stopped and so the distance between us became shorter. We had entered a clearing of some sort, an emptier area, as if there had once been a house amongst the forest, everything overgrown but less so where the building must have been before, traces only left by disarrayed parts of stone walls.

6 In the centre was a table that seemed to stretch into the surrounding shadowed trees, its cloth as overgrown as the vegetation around it, old and left untouched for years. And in its centre sat an empty chalice, bread beside it, and a cross standing between the two. The figure had placed itself at the table and began

to pour into the chalice, filling it with what I presumed to be wine, the dark plum liquid falling quietly into the cup.

7 All was still for a minute. When I moved my rapt gaze from the scene it fell on the figure facing back at me, any features hidden by its thick hood. I understood and took my place, standing in front of it.

8 I took communion with this strange figure as I did at church. It would motion silently to the bread and watched me as I broke pieces off for both of us. I washed mine down with the chalice of wine, prompted also by the hooded stranger. I did not see it drink, but after my own sip, the chalice looked to be less full than I would have expected.

9 My fears washed away, as they always did after communion. Yet, this was different. I knew now. As the figure guided me out of the forest, I knew it was a sign from God. It walked no slower or faster than before, stopping at the forest's threshold, and turning back into the trees once I had caught up.

10 I knew that I would not need to run anymore. That the church would see how they had been mistaken. That I had been absolved in the eyes of the Lord.

11 Too caught up in my revelation I did not hear the approach of the people of my church. As they came into view however, my resolve heightened. They had come to me! To welcome me back. So many of them, and I smiled out to each one, looking around as my eyes settled on the Priest. It was all a horrible misunderstanding. Nothing that could not be fixed.

12 The Priest called out to me calmly. There was a sharpness in the words though, that cut through to my hope and deep into me, 'You cannot keep running Sinner. You must take your place of punishment.'

13 'We will crucify you here.'

14 I had committed no crime, done no wrong. Even God saw this. I was so sure of it. Why were they moving closer to me? What threat was I to them? They crowded too close, and I had no escape this time. I could not fight

despite all reason in me that shouted out against it.

15 I fell to my knees, and let wretched self-pity wholly consume me. The Priest stood before me and I repented then, offered my hands to whom I had always seen as a vessel of God, no longer so holy to me now. They could do whatever they needed to me, to feel virtuous and good. I would become the dust and ash necessary to paint their foreheads, if that were what it would take. If it would be enough for them.

16 For God may forgive, but his children do not.