

Echoes of Winter

The sun blazed high in the sky, glaring down upon a world ungrateful for its presence. Hot wind rolled across the desert, taking with it the dust and decay of the land it had once been. The distant mirages shifted and danced, inviting an onlooker further into the dry, searching for water that was never there to begin with.

It wasn't always like this. It wouldn't always *be* like this. At least that's what we hoped.

The dry had been taking over for three years now. Three years of slowly increasing temperatures. Three years without rain. Three years of the world slowly losing life, colour, everything.

Water was a precious source now. Harboured closely by those who held it. All willing to fight to get it. Money, once a powerful tool, had all but been forgotten. What was the point of it? It couldn't buy anything when there was nothing to buy.

In just a matter of weeks, the soil had turned to sand and dust, dried and deprived of all nutrients. Trees could still be seen reaching high towards the sky, dry hands praying for the moisture they so desperately needed.

A fox walked along the dusty path, thin and mangled. Its once golden fur had turned ashen and dusty. Paws trailing along the path, tongue lolling from its mouth as it dragged itself forward, slowly, one paw in-front of the other.

Days, it had been without water and *weeks* it had been without food. How was it alive you may ask? Well, I would like to know also.

Determination, it seemed. The sheer refusal to the hands of death reaching for it. Stubbornness that allowed it to continue on, and on, and on, and on.

Perhaps it knew. It certainly knew more than any person had ever known before they even knew they didn't know it. For life there must be loss and even after loss there would always be life.

The fox simply refused to be part of *this* loss.

As it dragged its feet along the road, the fox sniffed the ground. Searching for any hint of moisture, near or far. Searching for the now scarce life-giving liquid.

There. A faint wetting of its dry snout and the fox was off, walking with a steady pep in its step. I followed it cautiously, trailing slowly behind it. I doubt it would be scared of me, but I didn't want to risk it.

The fox wandered ahead, snout still pointed to the earth, and it bounced along the dusty roads.

Up ahead, the source revealed itself.

It was an old windmill.

Tattered and half fallen over, its fans were few and its colour matched the dust. It creaked as the hot breeze blew it gently, slowly, while it grinded away the build-up of sand.

The fox trotted up to the black trough sitting at the base of the weathered metal structure and jumped in with a soft splash. With a cry, I ran forward, taking in the precious water with great, desperate gulps. The fox stood in the trough, lapping up the water beside me, pleased with itself and enjoying the precious source. I gasped for air as I raised my head out of the water, coughing as the muck swirled around my mouth.

Previously, that would have made me sick, but desperate times called for desperate measures. The body could do incredible things when pushed to the brink.

The water in the trough was little, enough to just fill the bottom quarter and a layer of slime and algae covered its surface. But it was still water, good precious water.

I wondered why it was so low anyway. Maybe the underground source was running out? It wasn't like there was a lot of wind these days, but it *was* still pumping.

Beside me, the fox had jumped out of the water and was wondering off again, a new light in its eyes with the clearing to its dust filled mouth. It wandered off to a nearby tree which was offering *some* shade in the afternoon sun.

I watched as the creature circled the tree, whimpering, almost longingly. A long sad, whine aching of memories.

In the old days, this scene had looked very different.

The fox remembered the tree, the trough and the windmill. It remembered the cooler temperatures and the white blanketed terrain. It remembered a time where it had danced carelessly in the sun without heat.

How it had played with its siblings, rolling around and tackling them in the snow and their mother yelped at them to be gentle. How its, now dusty coat had been a splendid golden orange, thick and full to protect it from the cold. How food and water used to be plentiful. How its mother had taught her family how to hunt, punching deep into the snow, searching for the burrowing creatures they ate.

The fox let out another pitiful moan and curled itself under the shade of the tree, sniffing into its tail quietly.

I walked towards the tree slowly closer to the animal, sitting down beside it. The fox looked at me wearily. Perhaps this was the end for it. Survived so long to be taken out under the tree it was born under. It didn't care anymore.

What was the point of this lonely, desolate existence, spared from its family's fate but saved to a worser one.

After a moment of no movement, the fox put its head down again, curling tighter into itself as though it wished it could disappear.

I shuffled closer.

Closer again, until I could reach out and gently hover my hand just above the animal's dusty coat. It shuddered under my presence, tensing, preparing for what was to come next.

I lowered my hand gently and stroked the crying creature. It looked at me sad, afraid, but not moving away. We sat there together for a while and the fox relaxed into the dust, chest rising and falling with my own.

It wasn't anything that could be spoken between us, slight language barrier there, but there was understanding, recognition of the other's loss, loneliness and longing.

Together we gazed out on the land before us.

"I used to live on a farm," I said aloud.

The fox lifted its head to peer at me curiously. *Go on*, it said.

"We used to have over 200 head of cattle, cropping, the works. My Dad would spend days working on the busted machinery, always coming to dinner smelling of grease and

covered in dust,” I laughed to myself at the memory. “He always seemed to do it just when Mum had cleaned the floors too. His boots would leave footprints on the lino and Mum yell at him and Dad would laugh, pick her up and whirl around as she laughed and yell at him to let her go at the same time.”

The fox laughed next to me, shuffling closer so its head rested on my lap.

I told the fox stories about the cows running amok across the freshly planted paddocks, my dad yelling at me to hold the flashlight straight and my Mum laughing hysterically at terrible reality television.

“They, ehm, they both died in a car crash around 3 years ago”, I choked. “About a month before the dry started.” I laughed bitterly looking to the endless blue skies above.

“They’re probably the lucky ones, missing out on all this fun.”

The fox whined softly, nestling itself further into my lap.

I scratched under its chin, smiling softly at it.

“Do you think this will ever end? Will winter ever come back?” I thought wistfully of the snow that used to occupy the snowball fights between my family. Dad would always heap the snow into one massive ball and dump it on mine and my Mum’s head.

The fox hopped off my lap and trotted around to the opposite side of the tree.

There in the twisted, dead roots was a fox hole. I peeked my head inside as the fox wandered in, giving me the tour of its now neverhome.

I haven’t been here since the dry first began, it said, walking over the dusk covered roots to open sky again.

My siblings, my mother, I lost them all to other predators, some to Two-legs like you. Seeing it again reminds me of what this place used to be. It all holds these... echoes of winter. How it had once been and hope for how it may be again.

The fox walked over to me, looking up at me as I crouched in the dirt.

I don’t know if it will ever end, this dry. But I know that winter will never truly be gone either, as I hold these memories in my heart.

I looked into myself, into these memories of my own. Fox was right. As long as we remember and cherish something that was, we have never truly lost what is.