

The Sun's Cold Stare

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Writing Through Art Literary Competition

Dr. Murphy

30 November 2015

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The sun signals a new day by scorching my cracked skin; the ground sings my feet, leaving them numb and inadvertently forming a protection from the pebble strewn path that ends in my demise. I can't say how long it's been since I've been displaced from the only home I have known, only that it's been long enough for every muscle in my body to ache from carrying a basket that holds all my possessions. Its weight provides an onus that slows my pace dramatically, and I contemplate leaving the basket behind or stopping to rest for a minute. My body grows even weaker in knowing that neither of the two ideas, which feel like fantastical dreams, is remotely feasible. Admitting defeat, I trudge on through the vast landscape of shrubs, far off plateaus, and exhausted expressions of my friends and family.

As I pass by the town that once belonged to my brothers and sisters, scowls of disgust mark me as a savage despite the fact that their people were the ones who terrorized us when we tried to embrace them. I can't help but feel a mixture of shame and anger, even though my life, my race is not and should not be a burden to them, and the fact that they can make me hate myself boils my blood more than the crippling sun ever could. Careful not to cause any more harm to myself, I keep my head down and stare at the wheat-colored dust as I shuffle away. All of a sudden, I feel something sharp pierce the small of my back, and I involuntarily turn my head to see the mischievous smile of a blond boy as his father grabs him by the shoulder to drag him away. I swallow my pride and my pain as I continue to follow the footsteps of suffering.

My footsteps become labored, and my breathing, is no longer voluntary. The night is drawing nearer, and our search for a place to rest for the night begins once again. Chilling wind tears through our clothes, chipping our stone faces bit by bit. The sounds of cries that haunted our ears earlier in the day are now replaced by chattering teeth and hushed prayers to keep us safe just one more night. As the stars begin to speckle the sky, we begin to set up camp. Entire families huddle inside tents to keep themselves warm, and mine is no exception: uncles, aunts, and cousins shuffle into the limited space while still trying to claim a small portion of ground for themselves. My parents had passed in a battle of resistance but didn't live to see the light of another day. Wrapping a blanket tighter around me, I allow my body to feel my sore muscles that I had ignored earlier, and I drift to sleep where I can forget who I am for a few hours.

The clattering of objects hurriedly being thrown into baskets and bags startles me from my dreamless sleep, ending the illusion of a normal life. I sigh as I try to gather my limited belongings and fight against the screaming of my limbs in protest of movement. Gritting my teeth through the pain, standing crouched in the tiny space of the tent, we pack up what little we have and continue on our journey to Hell. I wince with every step but hide the pain I'm suffering behind a mask of indifference.

To pass time, I think about how I got here. I remember the stories I heard when I was young about the white men coming to our land and the violence they brought with them. After hearing the stories, the other boys and I would have a pretend war with small rocks and twigs for weapons, but in our version, we won in the end, not the white men. Panting and giggling in the grass, we imagined what it would be like if we hadn't been forced inland to make room for the settlers. I think back to those times, how oblivious we were to the suffering of our ancestors, how the universe had played a cruel joke on us. I look to the sky and the puffy clouds that casually float through it and curse whatever god or entity that would ever wish this upon us. *Have we not been kind enough to our precious Earth? And if not, is this really a fair punishment?* These questions just leave me more resentful and nowhere closer to knowing the answer.

Our shadows are now at the shortest length of the day, and I have never known a heat like this one. It burns me like the heat of Hell that the white men told me would swallow me after I died. Ankles wobbling with each step on the uneven ground, my ability to follow the others becomes more and more impossible, but I refuse to accept defeat. For some reason, I feel a deep responsibility to live as if it were a debt I owe my parents for watching their massacre. I determinedly stare ahead to give my aching body an unforeseeable endpoint, but my vision becomes compromised, and everything is suddenly blurred, which feels like a result of my head being filled with air to the point of bursting.

Watching myself from the clouds, I see my ungraceful descent to the ground as I flail like fish fresh from the water gasping for air that refuses my invitation to enter my body. My fingernails claw at the dirt willing me to get up again, but that next time never comes. Because the subtle wind whispers to me to stop fighting the inevitable, I obey. Whether my obedience is voluntary or not, I will never know.

And from the mocking clouds, I watch my body exhale for the last time, but something is new, something I've never heard escape my lips. It's a sigh of relief and at long last, peace.