

Windblown

Stillness was a luxury often taken for granted and Rhea often found herself dwelling on her frozen moments, the ones instilled in her mind, isolated from life's blurry business. Since finding present glimpses of stillness had become something of a rarity, she'd try to conjure up fading memories: a picnic wrapped in the sun's soft yellow hues, distant lavender laughter, and the prick of sharp green grass. The 'clink' of a crimson bottle kissing the rim of her mother's wine glass reverberates around Rhea's skull until it gradually becomes duller and duller, luring her out of the daydream. She coughed dryly as she reached for her canteen, it felt light. "*It's always too light.*" She thought as she dropped her shoulder to pull the leather strap across her head. Her chest ached as she attempted not to get the strap tangled in her hair, as the wind whipped about her face dragging coarse sand, across her ruddy cheekbones. Carefully she twisted the cork, gently, as if not to wake it from some kind of slumber and peered into the canteen. Closing one eye and squinting with the other to get a better view, "*Only a swallow, maybe two*" She thought as she watched the water slosh around the shallow base.

"Got any left?" Thalia asked clumsily shaking her own canteen upside down. Rhea smirked and coughed into her elbow before reaching out to inspect Thalia's canteen. Rhea had always cared for her sister, more like a second mother. She often wondered if she had been *too* good to her. Sheltering her wouldn't protect her in the end, only preparation would. No one could have blamed Rhea though; Thalia had this innocence about her that shimmered in every wave of her dusty dark hair. A spark of the stillness. It was worth preserving, though Rhea felt selfish for doing so and wondered if it was too late to teach Thalia.

"A little" Rhea said, pausing a moment before holding out her canteen. "Don't drink it all."

"Course' I wouldn't drink it all, I just need a swallow or two," Thalia gripped the canteen with both hands as she tilted her head back, bracing for the lukewarm water.

"Take one, I need the other. I've got mud mouth." Rhea said as she tried to swallow. The taste of dry earth stuck to the roof of her

mouth. Grainy bits of sand seemed to be embedded on her tongue, scrapping against her teeth, crunching in her molars. *"It's in my lungs, it's everywhere,"* Rhea thought.

"All right all right. Here," Thalia mumbled handing over the canteen.

"Even lighter now," Thought Rhea she coughed once more before taking a swig of the water. She swished it around in her mouth before swallowing. It cooled her sore throat, easing what felt like cat-scratched skin. She left a few drops in the canteen, not because they would actually alleviate thirst, but because if the water was gone, Thalia's spark was gone.

It was getting dark, well darker, it was always dark. Even on the good days, everything was hazy. The dark, dirty blue sky let only scintillating bits of light through, despite the absence of clouds. *"Clouds,"* Rhea thought as she tried to hold on to the shifty spurt of a memory. She missed the clouds. The puffy ones, the wispy ones, the silver-bottomed ones, even the deep-blue angry ones. She imaged them, high above the haze. Floating loftily, in luxury, still, surrounded by the bright, sunny sky. She missed watching the clouds roll in, creating a deep blue blanket across the sky. It was oddly comforting to see, right before a storm. She missed the rain. Yes, it happened, but rarely, only a few times a year. During the rain was the only time she felt clean, fresh, free of dirt. She wiped her sweaty forehead with the back of her sleeve, *"More dirt"* she thought as she audibly let out a sigh.

"Thalia!" She shouted, pain shooting up her throat as she called out. She waved her arms back and forth, signaling for Thalia to catch up. After their drink break, if it could even be called that, Kairos, a boy in her stratum, called out to her and caught up with them. Rhea, wanting to avoid whatever conversation was about to happen, walked ahead.

"Catch up whenever *this* is over." She had whispered to Thalia as she brushed passed her. *"He probably wants to meet up in some remote place, profess his love for her, or worse."* Rhea thought, hoping that Thalia had heard her call.

“Thalia! Hurry up!” She yelled again after a moment; her weak voice being drowned out by the increasing wind. This time Thalia turned, awkwardly hugged Kairos, and began jogging toward Rhea.

“A hug?” She spoke softly.

“Shut up” Thalia shot back defensively, “He’s sweet.”

“Whoa Thal, I was just askin’,” Rhea laughed, “Is he stayin’?”

“Well, *he* wants to,” Thalia said.

“And what about his parents?” Questioned Rhea. Thalia said nothing. “Then don’t waste your time,” Rhea said, her voice unwavering. She had been cynical about relationships for a few years now. Ever since Galen had left.

“He doesn’t have to go just because they are,” Thalia mumbled, keeping her head down.

“He’s an auxiliary, just like me and you. You know if they leave, he has no choice.”

“I know, but-”

“Do you?” Rhea said harshly. That rendered silence from Thalia. Rhea shook her head, angry at herself for lashing out, angry at Thalia for being an optimist, angry at Galen all over again.

“It’s almost dark, we have to get home,” Rhea mumbled, tugging on Thalia’s sleeve to get her to walk.

“Follow the shortwave spires, follow the shortwave spires, shortwave spires...for as long as you can, don’t get lost, do not get lost.” Rhea’s Father’s voice replayed in bits in her head. His advice came to her often. Mainly in times of stress or survival. He seemed to be a part of her. His voice, scent, and soft eyes, all rooming in different corners of her mind.

“Can you see the tops of the shortwave spires?” Rhea asked pointing up through the hazy. Thalia looked up, eyes raw, and pink tinted in the corners.

“Barely,” she said sounding annoyed and, squinting to keep the dust out of her eyes.

“As long as we can see the tops, we can get home,” Rhea explained.

“Dad teach you that?” Thalia asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Course he did,” Rhea said, as a small smile appeared on her face. “Sorry about Kairos,” She said suddenly. “I shouldn’t hav-“

“Don’t be,” Thalia cut in, “I’m jus’ sick of people leavin’.” Rhea paused, not wanting to say the wrong thing, almost everyone who had come out to this place with them had fled, and lots of those who didn’t leave had died.

“It’s not his fault,” She said searching Thalia’s eyes for a reaction.

“I know, almost wish it was,” She paused, “It’d be easier that way, if I could just be mad at him.” Rhea nodded, unpleasant memories of Galen flooding her mind. Their end had not been a peaceful one.

“Come on, mom needs us home,” Rhea said. Thalia pushed passed Rhea, pointing up toward the shortwave spires.

“Follow the spires?” She asked, only to confirm what she already knew. Rhea nodded,

“Lead the way Thal,” She said as she cleared her throat and fixed her heavy book bag. She could see something new in the way Thalia walked. Pushing against the wind, the dust stripping the stillness from her hair. She pressed on, paving the way for Rhea.

The house was in poor condition, gaps in the wooden walls, pieces of the roof blown off, and an ever-indecent fine layer of sand. Maltania, the girl’s mother, swept daily. It had become an almost ritualistic process, back and forth and back and forth, flowing side to side, hip to hip. The rhythm was wave-like and hypnotizing, keeping her trapped until the dark sun began rising and her seven-month-old baby, Sydain cried. She let him cry long and hard, “*To get the dust out.*” She would tell herself. He cleared his lungs while she cleared her mind.

After a few moments, she’d bring out the basin of dirty water and carry it into her baby’s room. She’d gathered up the damp, dust-covered, cloth that covered Sydian’s small crib, a precaution against the dust, and begun gently pushing the cloth into the basin, watching the air bubbles escape until there were none, drowning the red and brown stained cloth. Sydian always quieted, as much as a baby can, while she did this, cooing and babbling. His chubby, red, cheek pressed against the soft, worn pillow, straining to see the water bubbling. He’d laugh when the air would reach the top,

popping and splashing. After the cloth was dead, Maltania would flap and shake the muddy water off her hands, before reaching into the crib, scooping Sydian up, holding him close to her chest, rocking, wave-like and hypnotizing. Back and forth and back and forth, flowing side to side, hip to hip. *"Just like sweeping"* She'd think, eyes closed, ears listening; straining to hear Sydian's little heart beating, his lungs expanding, and eyes fluttering, over the howling of the wind. He'd reach for her nose, pawing at it with a gummy smile pasted on his doughy face. This was Maltania's stillness. Her gentle rocking, her pure son. It was a piece unchanged by the constant wind, dirt, and dryness. Her girls had been changed, having to brave the wind, to attend erudition, but here, in her dust-covered home with her gentle babe wrapped up was a sliver of peace. Days and weeks passed following the same routine of sweeping, coddling, nursing, changing, and waiting for the girls to get home.

Today Rhea and Thalia were late. The sun was almost down and Maltania was beginning to worry, as a good mother does, that her girls were in some kind of trouble. They'd been late before so she tried not to stress but her maternal mind could not rest until she saw them. She paced back and forth and back and forth before she grabbed the broom and began flowing, side to side, hip to hip. Trying to separate herself from her worry. When not even that could still her, she set the table for dinner. Plates upside down, cups upside down, bowls upside down, *"To keep the dust out"* she told herself while she carried over the cloth clover, dandelion salad, and jackrabbit stew. She heard a thud on the front door and muddled teenage laughter behind it. Thalia pulled the door open, fighting the wind before it grabbed hold of the door and flung it wide open, clattering and thumping against the side of the house.

"Sorry, Momma," Thalia said. Laughter still escaping between her words. "Rhea let me lead the way home."

"That's why we're late," Rhea finished bumping her sister with her shoulder before she began working to pull the door shut.

"Good," Maltania said, "It's bout' time you learned to find your own way home," She said, winking at Thalia before she gave a thankful look at Rhea.

“I lost track of the spires a few times, ‘specially when the wind kicked up more dust than usual,” Thalia said trying to defend herself.

“You’ll get it, you’ve got your Father's blood runnin' in ya’, he was a navigator, always knew where he was, even when he didn’t. Maltania chuckled remembering her husband’s stubborn nature, always insisting he knew how to get somewhere even when he didn’t. Thalia scoffed a smile spreading on her face,

“Is that why it took us twice as long to get to Siltbluff, as everyone else who used to be here?” Rhea questioned, sprinkling in some sarcasm as she spoke.

“Pretty much,” Maltania answered, shaking her head. She let out a sigh and said, “Rhea, go check on your brother, make sure he’s still asleep before we start eatin’.” Rhea set down her bag and canteen in a corner and disappeared into Sydian's room.

“She’s so much like him,” Maltania said wiping her hands on a spare cloth.

“She *is* stubborn,” Thalia said avoiding the sadness in her mother's voice.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Maltania said.

“Sydian is fast asleep, snorin’ a little too,” Rhea said as she walked back into the kitchen.

“Great, let’s eat before he wakes up,” Maltania said as she plopped down in her seat, blowing the dust off of her plate before flipping it right side up. The three plunged into the modest meal, chewing loudly, and taking turns talking about their days as the house panels thudded and creaked against the wind.

That night, Rhea lay in her small bed, her feet hanging off the end. She wiggled her toes feeling the sand between them and stifled a cough rising in her throat, trying to keep quiet. “*Why did you bring us here?*” She asked her Father in her mind. She’d often have one-sided conversations with him which mainly consisted of her asking questions she'd never have answered; how could you leave us, how did you fall in love with mother, what was she like before us, and so on. But Rhea knew it wasn’t his fault, the Ministry of Agronomy had promised wealth to all those who journeyed out to the unturned

land. *"They pushed me,"* She could almost hear her Father's words in the darkness. In the end, it had all been for nothing, a few years of prosperity was not enough to make up for the devastation that was now their everyday lives. Even then, the lives and people they lost far outweighed the loss of their wealth. *"I hate them"* Rhea thought, and she meant it. She despised the Ministry of Agronomy, for their big talk and their lavish lies. Whenever she started to blame her father, she pictures their round bellies and fat faces. She imagined them lounging about in large plush chairs, eating fresh fruit, and sipping on honey milk. She'd hear them say, *"We didn't make your family go, your Father did,"* with smug looks on their faces, and then she'd remember who was really responsible for her family's situation, and for her Father's death. Rhea thought of what she would say to them, but the words were never as harsh or as full of loathing as she wanted them to be. She didn't think there were words strong enough to show how she felt.

Restless she got up out of bed and waded into the kitchen, her feet leaving delicate footprints in the layers of dust that had accumulated through the night. She opened the front door, hoping to see the moon, she didn't dare hope to see the stars, but there were none. Just endless dark matter, laced with whistling wind, and bristling sand. Rhea let out a sigh, that rumbled in her lungs. She cleared her throat trying to ignore the grainy sand, and hazy dust inside of her, hanging in her lungs and threatening her every breath *"Dust pneumonia,"* she heard her Father's diagnosis echo in her mind. She sat on the couch, wondering how she could tell Thalia, how could she tell her mother that something was wrong until sleep consumed her.

Rhea couldn't do it. Weeks had passed since that night, and each time she thought about telling her family, she saw their sad, pitiful faces. Eyes wide, mouths slightly open. It was too painful. She had become slow-moving, she disguised herself as if she was happier than ever, cherishing time with her mother, sister, and baby brother. Saying the words "I love you" over and over again. Each time becoming more serious than the last. Thalia questioned Rhea about her sudden kindness, and she would always respond,

“I’m jus’ tryin’ to be more grateful Thal, that’s all,” but Thalia wasn’t buying it Rhea could tell. Thalia knew her sister had always been a ‘tough love’ kind of person, being sweet wasn’t the way she had ever shown her affection. Days passed like this, Rhea’s sweet attitude getting thicker and glossier, irritating Thalia to the point where she fought with her sister, trying to pry Rhea’s secret from her lips. When Rhea wouldn’t cave, Thalia ignored her on the way home from erudition, walking faster than Rhea could manage. Thalia put so much space between them that she could never hear Rhea calling out to her over the wind. It wasn’t surprising that one day Thalia couldn’t hear Rhea’s heavy breathing, her sporadic coughs, or her gasps for air. Thalia only noticed something was wrong when she peeked over her shoulder and saw Rhea lying, face down in the dirt, still and unmoving.

The fever brewing in Rhea hammered against her skull. It pulsed back and forth and back and forth, pressing into her eyes and making them hot and heavy. Her eyelids drooped and she felt as if she couldn’t open them. She heard Thalia vaguely, yelling something Rhea couldn’t make out. Thalia’s words were red and urgent, but Rhea’s mind was a lilac kind of blue. She drifted away, into a sea of swirling colors, rusty orange, magenta, seafoam blue, and various hues of wavy gold.

“Rhea!” Thalia screamed as she tugged on her arm trying to get her to move. “Come on we’re almost home,” She said grunting as tears bubbled up in her eyes. She pushed on Rhea’s shoulder using her strength to roll Rhea over onto her back. Thalia inspected her face, there was a deep cut in between her eyebrows. There were bits of gravel stuck in a small pool of blood, dark, red, and gushing down the bridge of her nose and into her eyes. Thalia frantically wiped the blood with her sleeve, trying to be delicate. Her vision went blurry, and she wiped her eyes. “Rhea please, I don’t know what to do,” She said tears slipping down her dirty cheeks. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, jus’ please wake up!” She yelled into the wind. Her voice was swept up in a swirl of dust. “Wake up!” She yelled again. She knew it was pointless. After a moment she grabbed Rhea’s boots and began dragging her towards their home. Thalia was tired, her muscles ached, and her mind was a mess. Eventually, The house was in view. Thalia dropped Rhea’s legs and rushed in.

“Momma, somethin’ is wrong with Rhea,” Thalia said as she slammed through the front door. Maltania’s face flushed, and she set Sydian down hurriedly.

“Where is she,” She said sternly.

“Outside, she won’t move, I tri-” Thalia began, but Maltania pushed passed her before she could finish. The door closed with a thud. Thalia stood there. Sweat dripped down into her eyes, sand stuck on her face. Sydian began crying, hiccupping in between screams. Thalia couldn’t move. She was frozen. *“It’s all happening again.”* She thought as her mind raced memories of her Father started flashing before her. Maltania flung the door open, Rhea was in her arms still unconscious.

“Get some water,” She said pushing the words out between heavy breaths. Thalia obeyed, carrying the heavy basin over to the floor where Maltania had laid Rhea down.

Thalia watched as her mother gently tended to her sister day and night. She dribbled water into her mouth and dried the sweat on her forehead. Rhea’s fever persisted, getting worse day by day. Thalia avoided the scene. She hated herself for being so distant and bitter toward her sister all those days leading up to her collapse. She knew something was wrong, and she had been angry instead of worried. *“It should’ve been me,”* she told herself late at night. She knew her sister had stepped up since their Father had passed away, but she had never thought about exactly how much Rhea had taken on.

The next morning, Rhea was gone. Thalia was awoken by her mother. She found her wailing on the floor next to Rhea’s corpse. Thalia could barely look at her sister’s pale face. Her freckles were darker, her eyes sunken. She was still. The only unmoving thing amongst the jostling of the wind. Thalia didn’t say anything just grabbed the rusty shovel that lived in the kitchen and went out into the wind. The pale hazy light was shimmering off of the dust in the air. It was almost beautiful. Thalia hated herself all over again for thinking that. How could the very thing that killed her sister, infected her lungs, and clogged them up be beautiful? She pushed the shovel into the ground, digging deep to get past the soft sifting

silt, that never sat still. She dug, for hours, silent tears falling from her face. She stifled her sniffing, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Eventually, she created the shallow grave. Too drained to go on, she trudged back into the house, her mother had wrapped Rhea's body up in a sheet.

"Is it ready?" Maltania asked as she stared at the wooden wall. Thalia paused,

"It was the dust, wasn't it." She said.

"Dust pneumonia, same thing that got your Father," Her mother answered still not looking up. Thalia nodded. Maltania stood up and motioned for Thalia to help with the body. They each took a side and carefully carried Rhea out the door and into the grave. Maltania whimpered,

"My baby girl," She muttered, "My sweet baby girl," over and over again. Thalia hugged her, feeling her mother's body shudder against hers. They stayed like this for a while, holding on to one another. Then Thalia pulled away she walked into the house, emerging a few moments later with a wooden plank and a kitchen knife. She sat on the porch steps as she etched,

"Rhea Glendara, 1921 to 1938" Maltania wiped tears with her sleeve and Thalia placed the makeshift headstone at the top of Rhea's fresh grave. Right next to her Fathers.

