

Lay Waste to Thee

by Vladimir Bilenjki
concept by Christopher Winkler

It started with a solitary tree, which bore no leaves or fruit but stood tall amidst its barren surroundings. A hyena came, wandering in search of a mate, when it had to relieve himself. He paced up to that single, lonely tree and marked his territory. As the days turned into months and then into years, the seasons changed and the tree began to sprout plumage. The hyena's kin could not find him but they were attracted to a familiar scent in the desolate landscape. They leaned against the tree and cuddled under its shade. No one was there to care for them and they had to fend for themselves. Prey scarcely wandered into sight and when it did, it was too far out of reach for the infants. Their excrement, their saliva and, in time, their flesh and blood, all sunk into the ground around the tree.

By the time a pack of hyenas came by, sensing the odor left by the rotting flesh underneath the shade of the tree, the leaves dripped with honeysuckle dewdrops. While the hyenas were interested only in eating their kin's carcasses, there was one solitary hyena who took notice of the sticky nutrients on the bark and licked them. It was sweet and so this hyena became particularly close to the tree. It would urinate on the tree and, unlike the rest of the pack, this hyena was well-nourished enough to salivate from its wet lips in his slumber under the fruitful lumber. This hyena had become so attached to the tree that he was able to stay around the tree that his kin and their mother would find peace underneath. Their children grew strong and the hyenas would bring their food back to the tree so that they may share it amongst themselves. The tree provided sustenance: a place around which the family of hyenas could coexist and, beneath it, a history of their trappings and bearings.

The hyena grew old and his children were now capable hunters who had already eaten their mother, whose death meant that their father's death was not far off. Barely able to walk for a few minutes before collapsing from exhaustion, the hyena pondered, knowing that its body will be a pile of flesh for his children to fill their stomachs. In this thought, his primal fear overtook him. In his fear, the hyena escaped while his children were out hunting. Limping as he walked, the tree was slowly eclipsed by the horizon and there was no other hyena in

sight. Brought to tears by his surroundings, the hyena knew there was no going back to the tree and so he staggered onwards; to that uncertain distance his feet may never bring him to, yet upon that distance, his eyes will always be set.

Left far behind the old hyena were his children, feasting on the catch of the day. The blood of their food painted the patches of green grass at the foot of the tree a rusted red. Unlike their father, the hyenas did not care for the sweet bark of the tree — they were coldblooded carnivores that lived only to satisfy their hunger. They scoured the desert for days, which grew progressively longer, until the hyenas would take weeks to return to the tree. The tree began to blossom with beautiful foliage, while the hyenas got skinnier and weaker. The tree's shade was their only sanctuary from the sun; otherwise, their fur would split in coarseness with skin as rough as the sand stuck to their paws. No longer would they gnarl, their calls reduced to pathetic pants as their strength to hunt wanes. Around them, however, daffodils began to sprout. Around the patches where the hyenas would relieve themselves, tree shrubs began to grow. Unlike the dry landscape on the outskirts, the soil around the tree was damp and muddled by urine. As the land became fertile all around, the hyenas were clinging onto the straws of life as they slipped from their reach. Like a mirage in the distance, a few figures were coming closer to the hyenas, resting underneath the shade of the tree. One of the hyenas was already dead and the remaining hyenas started gnawing at their dead brother's body. The figures were closing in on the hyenas, staring into the black eyes of their vulnerable prey. They drew their spears and lunged at the hyenas.

Tearing the branches from the tree and piling them under a chopped roast, the humans cooked the hyenas' flesh after tearing it from their skin. They ate under the shade of the tree, which has begun to sprout young and sweet fruit. Clad in their nomadic garbs of assorted pelts, the travelers have crossed countless well-trodden paths before getting here, yet they would have been hard-pressed to have settled down anywhere for as long as they settled by the tree. Though they were people, they were still primitive, spitting and urinating on the encampment tree. The puddle expanded for months until it began to overflow. Years passed and some trees had matured enough to bear fruit. The nomads who had only come by the tree on occasion had slowly settled into the area. Their prey was also attracted to the garden but without a doubt they would drop dead when confronted by the slings of their spears. As some of the nomads settled, they had children and raised them underneath the tree. The garden grew with the footprints of the children's feet and soon, like the children, patches of greenery would grow into their independence from the family tree. It was still custom for the tribe to relieve themselves in the puddle around their tree. Together, the trees eventually grew into a sparse forest as a generation of once nomadic younglings made tents around them. A community had flourished, and the puddle of saliva and urine from which it blossomed had spread as the soil beneath it parted.

Around this fertile community were other tribes who would come to trade with them: hides, foodstuffs, vegetation, and even labor. The communities coalesced and seeped into one another, ingratiating to settlers both their resources and themselves. Innovations came as a result of their unity, but they all still maintained their vulgar attraction to pissing and spitting in the pool around which this fresh-faced culture was rooted. The pond expanded with the colony and as hundreds of years passed. The depth of the pond, caused by the erosion of the soil as it parted, made what was once a patch of mud into a body of fluids — some would call it water if it weren't in actuality just an accumulation of urine and saliva. This communal latrine had come to define their ancestors as much as the huts they've built for their families. Being a part of the culture and therein its history meant relieving yourself in the pool. It grew slow and steady until the region had become so fertile that it started receiving an unusual occurrence regularly: that of rain. Even in the rainy season, people would still take a stroll out of their homes to relieve themselves whenever they felt the urge to. The preservation of their culture was of the utmost importance, not so that they can face any colony in their way, strong and boldfaced, but because the spirits of their ancestors inherently became linked to this pool of filth. With the rainy seasons, however, this pool expanded at an accelerated pace and as more and more generations came. While the people grew with new and more complex beliefs, their land remained true to its closeness with nature despite the tree around which the community formed sinking into the depths of their own waste, wherein it wilted into flotsam. The land became a locale in which traders from far and wide found value. Traders were keen on contributing their own bodily fluids to the pool to mark their visits. As generations had gone by, intellectuals and all sorts of astute talents contributed to the artificial beauty the land had to offer. True to the religious tradition that coalesced within the community, statues of great craft were erected; some even dedicated to the foliage and the pool of piss which had come to be the spring of this growing culture. Tourists had travelled days just to see the murky waters and to relieve themselves in it so that they may be a part of its history. Below all the chaos, in the depths of the pool, loomed an unprecedented event: the evolution of an astonishing new organism.

The agriculture was as reliant on the pool as it had been in its meager beginnings. The pool widened as a result of the rainy seasons, as well as due to the traders, the tourists, and the ever-growing population there, and effectively spread into a lake. This lake was no longer a point of communal gathering as warm as the spit and piss that gave it a human temperature, as it was now vast and susceptible to the cooling breeze, which got colder as times got older. Even snowfall had touched down on the land that was once an arid desert and those dedicated to preserving the culture: a religious gathering who would brave the cold just to piss and spit on the ice. Traders were needed now more than ever because the animals in the surrounding territory were absent due to their hibernation and their pelts were needed more than their flesh just so the townspeople could stay warm. Traders got greedier as they cut away at more and more wood from the forests and loaded it onto carts wheels which they had carried back to their own land. The townspeople braved the treacherous winter,

the first of many to come, and the traders had come back much humbler folk than they were all those days ago, offering flesh for bowl of fruit, as had once been the common way of trading. The lake thawed and it continued to grow in the rainy spring. The huts they built were strong enough to endure the constant rainfall. Those left homeless and orphaned would lodge in the great hall so that they wouldn't have to lie on the same ground the hyenas preceding the humans knew as their death beds. Hunting was no longer a fruitful profession. The hunters who believed in God would pray to draw the animals back so that they may deliver the animals unto kingdom come. On a quiet, summer's day, the hunters had their prayers answered. As the still lake rippled, a few small, pretty skeletal tadpole-like creatures started swimming at the surface of the lake. They were thin, white and slightly hairy animals with visible mouths and a pearly sheen all over their skin. It's fair to say the people were enamored with them — they had come to love the wild children bore from their waste.

The town had to demolish the houses around the lake as it grew wider and deeper. Its people were good and helped build new houses in the outer limits for those who lose their homes. It seemed fitting that the greater history, the one the lake of urine and spit represented, overshadowed the paltry history of the few to be whittled down in generations come until a better home is built down the line for the heart their histories hold firm through the lashes of time. Ripples and heartbeats sounded, and moved and reverberated to an affect eventually forgotten in the minds of the peoples it beat for. It was a primitive yet good and forward-minded culture that was close to its roots yet intelligent beyond the lines which could have held its roots bound to their humble beginnings. Their ancestors, thousands of years back, would be in awe of what they had made for themselves in their understanding of the world through innovation and their good nature. In the millennia that have passed, the pearl tadpoles grew from their protozoan inception out of the minerals and nutrients in the peoples' waste to quiet and herbivorous lizard-like albino creatures with eyes bright enough to draw onlookers in and deep enough to look through them further than horizons stretch. They bred in the mouths of the statues that sunk into their lake while the people made statues in the lizards' image.

Some of the townspeople took to carving out bowls, urinating in them, and each taking a lizard from the lake to hold them in their bowls as pets. Though they may be aquatic, they have the tendency to be amphibious when food and compassion are in question. An intelligent species with grace, they would crawl to the edge of their bowls to receive sustenance and be thankful for it. They were the kind of household critters that the traders had become interested in, so they would buy them in return for goods and services, keeping them as a commodity as valuable as food and lumber to the outside market. The humans kept urinating into the lake and the lizards relished in it. It was a wondrous cycle, where outsiders couldn't tell if the townspeople were stuck in

some mass delirium or were simply in love with the lizards. They were holy creatures as far as the people were concerned; a gift from their ancestors as a token of appreciation for what they've made of their society, and so their town revolved around keeping their history and future alive by urinating and spitting in the lake. It became apparent, however, that the lizards could live thrice their expected lifespan in the lake when compared to a life in the bowl and this was becoming a problem the more inquisitive townspeople were keen on resolving. As generations passed, many started to feel guilty for domesticating lizards, seemingly against their will, and would return them to their natural habitat, even though there were always children who simply weren't able to let go. It was only a matter of time until those lizards that grew in bowls evolved... differently.

One early summer morning, a young girl awoke with a bloodied ear. The parents found blood around the brim of their lizard's bowl but did not think much of it. The next night, the lizard once again escaped its bowl and gnawed away at one of the eyelids of the girl, waking her. It kept gnawing away, biting into her eye until she screamed for help. This unusual event was of such concern that not only did the girl's parents immediately release the lizard back into the lake, but many other households started doing the same in fear of the lizards attacking them in their sleep. Pearl lizards were no longer as precious as they used to be, but they were nevertheless kept in captivity in lands far from the town unaware of the danger dormant in these shiny creatures. The carnivorous lizards thrown back into their natural habitat started to target the other lizards in the environment. It was a one-sided, violent affair until the lizards for whom the lake was their natural environment began to fend off their cannibalistic predators. The murky, yellowish waters ran red with the blood of these once precious porcelain pets. The blood-red moon only alleviated the sense of dread the townspeople felt as the disembodied lizards consumed one another. There was fear of the lizards rising out to the shores and coming to feast on the flesh of the townspeople, and so those living close to shore either took their belongings to the great hall or to a settlement far away. No one dare piss on the lake for fear of having one of the lizards jump out at them, nor would the people spit out of anger and disrespect for the nature of the lizards — all their waste would only fuel the lizards. As the homes moved further from the town's nucleus, it became apparent that, unlike ever before, the lake was not growing, save for on rainy days. It shrank as the people moved further away from it...

... And the last generations of this strange, pungent pool were coming to a close. The townspeople had since erected a barrier to keep the lizards away, making use the stone bits that once belonged to their statues. Resembling something of a crater, the town no longer had the need to expand, nor did it — it existed in contempt. It took years for the lake to dry up but when it did, it also took the foliage with it. The life that once thrived within was now a distant memory. The once green grass wilted as it too faded from memory. This land,

built on a vile respect for the dead and their vulgarity, was as gone as its people's history: a culture with a veritable crater straight in the center of it. The interest in the town was forever gone with its features but wild creatures had come back. This time around though, the people had the sense to feed these animals and look after what would soon be their prey out of necessity as otherwise, they would starve. Little did they know that like the boars they tamed and turned into helpless livestock, they had inadvertently had done the very same to themselves. Like a mirage in the distance, a few figures were coming closer to the town, a town whose solitary existence had erased the last shreds of strength and dignity its people could protect themselves with.

And they were gone.