

Love of the Roses

Her beauty was strange, in that it grew instead of diminishing the closer you looked. She was all made up of fairy-floss curls, with smooth, soft features painted in iridescence hues of chocolate, and deep, dark eyes that refracted light as clearly as any mirror, a sharp cupid's bow to frame luscious lips. But even she was not immune to time, and as she crept towards thirty, her complexion began to wilt. She saw it happening before her eyes. Reflected back at her in a startling reminder of her mortality: creases by her eyes and the slow draining of lustre, buoyancy, in her cheeks.

In all that followed, the thought never left her that it was this deterioration of youth that was responsible for poisoning her relationship. The reality was that the break was one she could never have seen happening: one from within.

It was in that year that she taught the lyrebirds to sing for her, luring them in with grain, feeding them tunes. And with a flurry of them surrounding her, echoing her songs, she would close her eyes and dance, dance until her husband called for her from the doorway, and then the birds would switch to repeating her name, again and again.

Helaena. They'd shrill, as if begging her to remain. But always, she would leave, even when the nights began to feel endless, and she wished she could stay outside, to see the stars, if only for a while.

Her days had once been broken up by visits from guests, but she was no longer invited inside to greet them, the novelty of her marriage having faded. She didn't mind, and that was perhaps the source of the problem. She had no qualms: she lived with a man whom she loved, in a house cosy and comforting, and she had *her garden*.

Even with the inclusion of the hours she spent asleep within the house, it was the garden she spent the majority of her hours occupying. To her, the garden was more than a caged collective of plants: it was an idyllic land in which she could be as appreciative of the world and loving of herself as she pleased.

She loved everything about that garden: the wiry bushes that grew without direction, their seeds brought in on the wind, the earthworms and beetles that could be seen skittering across the soil on hot days, the slugs and snails when it rained, the herbs and hardy sour fruits, the old gum tree that dominated the space, the pale eucalypts that contorted themselves to peer over the picket

fence, and the flowers, oh, how she loved the flowers, especially the brilliant crimson roses...

It was a piece of the earth to call her own. And call it she did, for it was not just to the birds she sang: but the flowers she spoke, the trees she whispered. The grass, the weeds even, she stroked. *Grow. Grow my darlings...* And their flourishing was conversation; the silent summer wind rustling in the trees was conversation; the cold that seeped up her arm from the shaded ground was conversation.

And to her roses, she told stories of a place where plants could be more; where wildflowers were not weeds; where trees were safe from the axe. She had ceased to grow long ago — before the garden, before her husband even, which was a rarity among their peoples. But she felt that with each year, her roots embedded more deeply in the earth and her connection grew clearer to its children, the flora. It never crossed her mind that the garden did not understand her, and when it finally spoke back, she was only surprised that it had taken so long to do so.

Her husband, though, saw her connection as a disease and intended to uproot it.

At first, when she spoke of the sweet nothings the roses whispered to her, he, in good sport, would join in on the story, playing along as if it were fun. And she would become confused. *You were not there... Why would my roses say that?*

But when it became clear that to him, that *to her*, the narrative was not fiction, but a true recollection of the day's events, he was disturbed by her behaviour. He tried speaking to her about it, calmly, as if to a horse, but that only prompted her to reply as would a horse, with soft whinnies and whines. In what he viewed as a divine show of obstinance, she refused to accept that she was anything less than blessed, much less damaged. He grew angry, both at her, for her stubborn disregard of the truth, and at himself, for loving a woman who had begun to decay so early, and he began to worry her body would follow suit. The talks became screaming matches, to which she would never give in. Fearing the curiosity of their neighbours, who were most likely too far away to hear them anyway, he would catch her howling with his mouth, and lead her back to bed, closing their growing division with kisses. Touching, to make their reality dissipate till morning.

He tried locking her inside during the day, but she would pound on the walls and tear at the plaster with her nails. It was a disruptive energy for working and entertaining his private guests, the more private ladies. But then, too soon, his love became one tinged with hate, for how could he have want for such a

corrupt vessel? She slipped from him further then, and he resorted to physically forcing sense into her. When they fought, he would slap her, press his fingers into the soft part of her neck, grab her arm till it bruised, and when the time came to end the fighting, to close the night with love-making, she would whisper, *No. The flowers told me no. There is something wrong here, they have told me so.* But he would do so anyway, and he would have to keep his lips glued to hers all night, for she would continue to scream long after the fighting had stopped. All that was left of his love was lust, and even that was contaminated with the obscure feeling that she was rotting away beneath his grasp.

But nothing helped, and by the first falling leaf, he knew what he had to do. So, on a night when he was sure Helaena's rest was less fitful than usual, he crept outside, to eradicate the source.

He started with the great hollow gum, and as its trunk was consumed by the oil-driven fire he had set, even he felt an obscure sense of remorse. It truly was a gorgeous tree. But when, finally dehydrated, it stopped steaming, and became one with the flames, he smiled.

When she found him — awoken by the sudden brightness and eye-watering, smoky warmth, and more than that, the screaming of her plants, her friends — there was almost nothing left.

His eyes were glassy; drunken off the heat. Amidst the dancing of flames, slowly enveloping all signs of life, he didn't notice her presence until she had thrown him to the ground.

Traitor! Traitor! Screamed the roses, and she screamed with them, digging her knees into his back, so he was forced to breathe in the desecrated, ashen soil. The tears were a stream from her eyes, hot and capriciously blinding.

If you love me, leave it be, she pleaded. And her husband's glassy look faded, leaving behind an icy hatred.

Let it burn to hell, he roared, and when he dragged her inside she didn't dare fight back, didn't dare look back.

After that, the days and nights were as one, spent in a quiet that grew, and there grew a greater and greater chasm between them. She watched from her window as the world greyed; watched as the fat clouds shed rain upon the land. Though she knew it to be the natural turning of the seasons, she couldn't help but feel it was representative of her withering existence. She'd never hated the cold before as she hated it then; it was the ache that never left her, resonating in her bones.

She couldn't bring herself to leave the house and, for the first time, she found herself glad that her room did not overlook her garden, for she knew it would only further instil the hollowness in her chest.

All too soon, the darkness started to lift; spring began to lick the land dry, and she was acutely aware that she had lost an entire season. But with spring's break came also a break in the spell of silence.

Another sound filled the air then: a crisp, melodious laugh, filled with youth and innocence. It was a sound she had heard before, many times over the years, leaving the house as she entered, like a shy ghost. But this time she knew its meaning. Knew its meaning in the sweet nothings that trailed it, the soft suckling sounds, the moans. Though it was proof of their love's end, she took solstice in the other woman's pleasure, and hoped it would never sour.

More importantly, with spring, came the greatest gift of all: the return of growth. Winter had always been a quiet time, but that year there had been less than a whisper from the roses; their fear present in everything they didn't say.

She tried not to let her ecstaticism show as the voices hiked up in decibels. Her precious roses, the favourite of her friends. The only survivors, stretching their stems to the sky like antennae, broadcasting their thoughts directly to her mind.

That is not your place anymore, lamented the roses, their still-starved but growing strength giving her solace, fortifying her. *Your place is with us*. And she knew they were right. So, with no more than a whispered *I love you* to the man she knew no longer returned her love, if ever he had, Helaena slipped out.

It was a full moon that night, its light blocking out the stars; air barely chilled and clear of clouds. *Join us*, the roses called, and so she did.

She lay among the flowers, her friends. She closed her eyes, breathing in their sweet scent, incapable of even feeling the thorns of the bush beneath her in the wave of calm that overtook her, and took a thickly stalked, blooming rose in her hand —

And tore open her wrists with its sharp thorns.

Even as the blood poured from her veins, she couldn't help but hope the man she loved would come looking for her. She still hoped for a happy ending, in which he stopped short the — by then inevitable — end. They would made up, he would promised to be better, they would both ignored the lie in it.

Instead, the life drained from her, and the roses suckled happily at it.

Hunger quenched by the warm flow of blood, the thorned plants tried to reach out, to arch upwards towards the moon's pale face, but they found themselves trapped beneath her stilled body. Pulsating with energy and aching to grow, to capture the reflected sunshine, to reclaim their friend, the rose bushes crawled across her skin, twisting desperately, thorns embedding themselves in her lifeless form, enveloping all signs of her physicality. Wandering growths slipped inside her fresh wounds. Buds formed all around her, tightly wound points in a thousand shades of crimson, peaking out from the cavity of her mouth, in her hair. They stood by, not a single petal curling out in bloom, as though waiting for a final instruction.

A final, lonesome stem dug its claws in and tore through the skin of her back. It crawled up between the notches of her spine and, tip like a bloodied spear point, broke its way out from between her ribs —

And she screamed, petals opening like mouths to echo her call; patient buds erupting into a chorus of blood red blossoms, spreading like a war-field from within her.

She had been living as the dead for too long. There was no one left to mourn her, no one left to love her. Except for her roses. Her beautiful, *loving* roses. A love so consuming it left nothing. The only reminder that she had existed at all the twin thorns which she left protruding from her husband's eyes.