

Text by Alex Schmidt after Michael Asher's "Untitled"

The Fountain

a short survival experience inspired by

Micael Asher's "Untitled"

Overhead the sky was darkening and a wet breeze was blowing heavy fog inland from the sea. Tendrils of vapor swirled about, colliding with others, sending momentary cascades of moist droplets sparkling in the meek, silty sunlight. Thicker beads of water began to fall from the fog as the early process of coalescence began above.

Below, in a basin overgrown with manzanita and scrub brush, a figure sat tucked into their orange raincoat, face upturned to the performance overhead. Mouth agape, eyes closed, they tried to swallow up the moisture, gulping in whatever they could. But only the crisp emptiness of coastal air graced their strained and wagging tongue.

Face slick with the mist, they gave up and turned their gaze down to the stones scattered within the basin. They reached for a smooth-surfaced pebble, wiping flecks of mud and what might have been bird shit from it with their shirt. Smoother now after the polishing, they noticed the beauty that had been smothered behind the grime. Small dark veins ran throughout the pebble, contrasting against its dark consistency. Holding it up to the light, they squinted into the pebble and saw within it that a complex dimension of pillars and rivulets seemed to pull their eye

further inward. There were varying gradients of gray and blue hues not unlike the ocean whose waves could be heard rumbling faintly somewhere beyond the fog.

Being upheld so, the pebble had gathered enough moisture that a fat droplet had begun to form and now ran over their thumb and forefinger, sliding over the little stone surface. They laid out their tongue and caught the droplet then put the pebble in their mouth and began sucking on it before rising stiffly to their feet.

It was time to move on and rising elicited several pops from their ligaments, like the snapping of small branches. Shouldering their pack, they made their way out of the basin and over the rise to discover a multitude of structures looming ahead, standing sentry in the fog. A jolt ran through their body, their heart began to quickly flutter and they dropped to the dirt, held their breath, and listened.

The sounds of trickling water, hushed wind, the breaking of waves upon some shore, echoed out of the fog. They looked onward for any unnatural light flickering among the cluster of buildings. There was none. There were no lights, no sounds — other than the trickling of water, the hush of wind, the soft far-off crashing of waves upon some shore out beyond. There was no bird song or sound of small animals, there was no sound of rushing traffic or stamping feet because those things that would have made such sounds were few, swallowed up by time and sickness. Those that were left were rarely ready to embrace another.

They crawled and wriggled their way to a small outcropping of rocks and continued to study the buildings through the fog heaving and sweating in their coat. They licked their lips, running their tongue over the dry canyons that had formed upon them, and winced as they

absent-mindedly prodded the ever-widening split that had been developing in the corner of their mouth. They waited and sucked on the pebble.

After some time they stood and allowed themselves to be seen by whatever they believed could be seeing them and proceeded forward, toward the community of structures. The light filtering through the haze above had waned and dusk had begun to set in.

Approaching a glass door they wiped away a thick build-up of dust and peered into an ancient cafe. Paper cups, stir sticks, and stale paper napkins littered the floor. Chairs and tables were thrown askew and the glass display cases that once housed the sorts of things a cafe might serve were shattered, destroyed, and empty.

Their stomach groaned and they felt the pain of hunger and dehydration brought on by thoughts of the cafe. They tried the door. It did not open.

Circling the building, they came upon a neat grove of pine trees towering up high enough to overcome the structures around them. The wind now rasped and seemed to shriek through the pine needles. Metal benches, long rusted rough and brown, encompassed the grove and a small path ran through the middle of it all, slicing through patchy grass.

Something stood purposefully in the center of the pathway and as they slowly approached they recognized it as a water fountain. Stepping onto the pathway, disregarding all sense of stealth and safety they stood before it and played their hands over its smooth surface. Brushing away days of dust and debris, they picked pine needles and twigs out of the basin and noted how dry it was having been covered by the needles. Their attention revealed a tangle of veins traveling throughout the fountain's surface and for a moment it felt as if the pebble nestled

beneath their tongue tinged in response to this detail. They recognized the stone was marble and wondered why such a thing should be here in this place.

Taking a moment they looked around at the surrounding buildings and trees, the rusted down tables and chairs. Leaves rustled against the corners of closed glass doors and a flag pole, standing alone and bare, clanged against itself as it was swayed by the wind. The clouds above even seemed to part slightly, sending one glorious ray downcast to where the fountain stood. A scoff escaped them as they brought their attention back to the marble fountain.

Stifling a smile, as if this were a sign from some higher power, they thumbed the fountain's button. They had to cough to stop themselves from almost choking on their pebble as water spewed out into the air before them. It sprayed out in grey streams and gushes thick with sediments and they pulled their hand away from it altogether, perplexed by the slurry. Despite their release of the button, the fountain continued to shoot water into the air at an alarming rate. The dispersing mist caught the light so that a sparkling dazzled the air around them.

After some time the spouting died down and they were able to approach the fountain again without being drenched by it. The water now arching out was clearer, and gentle. Moving their hand through it, breaking its laminar flow, their skin singed by the surprising feeling of its frigid temperature. It was as if some deep-buried glacier had been tapped and this fountain was the only source of its precious water.

A movement within their gut broke them out of what had felt like hypnosis and they spat the pebble out into the palm of their hand and brought their cracked lips to the water with a ravenous fervor. A moment ago, what had been a murky surge of long-hidden filth was now the sweetest water, crystalline and pure. Sucking and gulping down mouthfuls, they barely allowed

themselves time to breathe as they drank. They gorged themselves on the water, not once thinking of potential contamination. Their belly protruded and bloated out beneath their weather-beaten jacket.

A break in the fountain's flow gave them pause and when it began to sputter they frantically reached into their pack and tore out a worn and dented canteen. It rattled with dry emptiness as they twisted the top off and began to catch the leaking stream. They followed the water's flow up until its last moments, angling and maneuvering their canteen to catch the last precious drops, filling it to the brim before the fountain died.

They then held the vessel, cradling it between two soiled and grubby palms, now dripping away with grime to reveal a forgotten natural complexion. Lightly hefting the canteen, they felt the comforting weight of the water within and praised it as if it held the ashes of a recently deceased loved one.

Water fell from their face and the chest of their coat was darkened and soaked through to their skin. The light above was now gone and again the gloom of dusk set upon the surroundings. The wind picked up a gathering of leaves and threw them into the air and they danced there as they slowly fell back to the earth.

With the canteen nestled tightly between their arms, they caressed the smooth marble finish of the fountain one last time. Placing their hand flat against its cold, hard surface they offered up a silent thanks to it before turning away to find someplace safe to sleep.